VIDEOGAME CULTURE

JANUARY 2007 £4.50

EDGE

COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONLINE









Here's a question; what kind of people play games? For all the great diversity that gamers represent – age, race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion – there are some things we all share. We like a challenge, we like absorbing information, we like immersing ourselves in a different world. These are the traits that draw us to games – but that's only the beginning, because these games that we're drawn to amplify exactly those characteristics. And so that enjoyment of immersion becomes an exacting eye for detail, honed over years of searching identical wall textures for hidden switches. That thirst for absorbing information becomes an obsessive memory for button combos and tech trees. And that love of a challenge becomes an ingrained doggedness, a never-say-die attitude which can emerge unexpectedly at moments entirely unrelated to gaming. All in all, it adds up to the one thing that binds gamers together: we're vicious, relentless critics.

That eye for detail logs every framerate drop, every awkward clip; that obsessive gamer brain catalogues every annoying bug, every unfair boss attack; that doggedness means that we worry at those flaws like dogs with a bone, endlessly discussing, ranking and condemning. And, as well as fuelling a thousand 'worst something-or-other in a game ever' threads, that's exactly as it should be. Games ask a lot of their players – time, money, effort – and our standards should be uncompromising. But it can make for a demoralising atmosphere when a game with a hundred-thousand man-hours of development still to go is condemned for having blocky textures and mismatched animations. And that's why game awards matter more than those of other media. They're not just a slap on the back for popular favourites, or a premature nostalgia trip. They're a chance to step outside the whirlwind of criticism and simply revel in the extraordinary accomplishment that today's best games can offer. None of the games singled out for this year's **Edge** Awards, which start on p58, is perfect. But all, particularly the overall winner and this month's cover game, *Final Fantasy XII*, are worth generous celebration.



EDGE

EDITORIAL
Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
Edge website www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Margaret Robertson editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Duncan Harris writer
Matthew Devereux writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Koji Aizawa, Steven Bailey, Jez Bickham, Mr Biffo, Christian Donlan, Geraint Evans, Tim Guest, Jon Jordan, Jeff Minter, Ben Richardson, Terry Stokes, Oliver Welsh

Thanks to Will Guyatt and Jon Hamblin

PRODUCTION
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer
Kirsty Bell senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Stuart Bell marketing executive

CIRCULATION
Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager

ADVERTISING
Jayne Caple advertising director
Scott Longstaff head of sales
Vanessa King advertising account manager
Mark Cantwell online advertising
Julian House recruitment account manager
Advertising phone 01225 442244

PUBLISHING
James Binns group publisher
Simon Wear international licensing director

SUBSCRIPTIONS & DISTRIBUTION
Edge,
Future,
FREEPOST RLSC-SXSE-SKKT
Unit 4, Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, Leicestershire
LE16 PEF
Email: games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 5th Floor,
Low Rise Building, Kings Reach Tower,
Stamford Street, London. 0207 633 3333.

SENIOR MANAGEMENT
Roger Parry non-executive chairman
Stevie Spring chief executive
John Bowman group finance director

PRODUCTION OF EDGE
Hardware: Power Macintosh G5
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office
Typography: (Adobe®) Frutiger Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic. Max (TF/LF) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic. Simian (Display/Text) Orangutan, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. QType Book, Medium, Bold, Italic. Prensa Book, Bold, Italic. Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid
Printed in the UK by Polestar, Chantry

Edge is brought to you by Future Publishing Ltd, the makers of PC Gamer, GamesMaster, PlayStation Official Magazine-UK, PlayStation World, NGamer and PSM3.

Future Publishing Ltd is part of Future plc.
Future produces carefully targeted special-interest magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, smart buying advice and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 150 magazines in the UK, US, France and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 30 other countries across the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). www.futureplc.com

"In this family, we do not solve problems by hitting people!"
"No. In this family, we shoot them."

recycle

Printed in the UK

ABC 33,597
January-June 2006
(Audit Bureau of Circulation)

CONTENTS

JANUARY

This month











Every month

EDGE

CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review

START

START


Wii
Yodobashi-Akiba
ヨドバシカメラ
Nintendo
Yodobashi Vision
GAMERS
本店







HARDWARE

Launch fever breaks

While PS3 and Wii keep their distance on the shelves, consumers get the fight underway

If one thing was made clear over the past weeks, it's that console launches still tell us more about console launches than they do about the platforms themselves. Thanks to PlayStation 3 and Wii, we now know that while gaming continues to plot its course into further generations, the process of shipping hardware from factories to homes has also evolved. Gone is the simple trilogy of pitched tents, stock shortages and vaguely bewildered celebrities; now high street numbers share the headlines with eBay, corporate presidents are stars and queuing, for a PlayStation at least, is anything but a linear experience.

Setting a precedent, Japan's November 11 launch of PlayStation 3 was markedly different to that of its predecessor. With attention focused primarily on those twin towers of Tokyo gadgetry – Yurakucho's Bic Camera and Akihabara's Asobit City – queues were already forming at 8pm before shutters that wouldn't open for another 11 hours. The air was conflicted: reports of severe stock shortages played on the nerves of those in line and dampened the buzz overall. At 7am, following a prompt yet predictable introduction by Ken Kutaragi, the tills opened and a new silence – that of the foreign auctioneer – descended.

Tokyo Photography: **Hiroki Izumi**



With supplies limited and few Tokyo stores taking preorders, many would employ a lottery system to determine which of the determined campers would heave a PS3 home for the weekend



With peripherals and key launch titles accompanying a console on most receipts, Japan's Wii launch ran with industry tradition while PS3's did not. A simpler unit with simpler production requirements, Wii satisfied enough customers to scupper the online auctions

Borne out by scenes of 'customers' stocktaking in train stations and streets, and by magazine publisher Enterbrain's announcement of a barely one-to-one attach rate for the 88,400 units sold in the first weekend, the influence of the resourceful online trader was at a high during PS3's debut week. The Chinese were instrumental, the US and Europe not without their own entrepreneurs. Sticking to its recent PSP policy, SCEE was quick to shut the UK's doors to the rapidly emerging

Borne out by scenes of 'customers' stocktaking in train stations and streets, the influence of the resourceful online trader was at a high during PlayStation 3's debut week

grey market, sufficient pressure being applied to retailers Play Asia and Amazon to abruptly halt their exporting operations. A ban imposed by eBay, meanwhile, stopped PS3-related British auctions until February 2007, and a restriction of one unit per seller has been announced, with only EU-purchased machines being eligible. UK Trading Standards officials were also notified of a company operating around London – Mastercash – whose £1.50 per minute phone lines would supposedly turn your personal details into a bona fide preorder.

Though Japanese auction prices would fall off

quicker and more sharply than anticipated, almost to retail prices, the November 17 launch of PS3 in the US would see the situation migrate overseas. EBay again imposed (lesser) limits, removing auctions by sellers with less than 98 per cent positive feedback and 50 recorded sales; eBay market research, however, still reported 14,675 PS3 sales (of both SKUs), at an average price of $1,186 (£600), during the subsequent week. Meanwhile, the mass and specialist media remained glued to events on the other side of the screen.

Even following the global 360 launch, with its horror stories of police escorts and backdoor escapes, the unrest caused by PS3's arrival was unprecedented. At the official launch sites – Manhattan's SonyStyle store and San Francisco's Metreon centre – tempers flared during moments when queues had to be moved, though were otherwise distracted by assurances of units for the first 750 attendees, and by the presences of SCEA president Kaz Hirai, Sony chairman Howard Stringer (both in New York), and SCE executive VP Jack Tretton (San Francisco). Free units were handed out to the first in line, and neither event broke notably with tradition.

Nationally, however, plenty of dramas unfolded

An armed robbery, a violent mugging, a car park trampling, a PS3-related carjacking, a drive-by and sporadic online accounts of fights over suspected queue jumping





The cult of Reggie grows unabated. Having earned his PR points by signing the first console sold, NOA's recently-appointed president continued to mingle with crowds gathered in New York's Times Square

amid, and sometimes beyond, retailers' waiting lines. Included were an armed robbery and shooting, a violent mugging (both in Connecticut), a car park trampling (California), an EBGames hold-up in which five consoles were stolen (Ohio), a PS3-related carjacking (Pennsylvania), a drive-by BB gun shooting outside a Best Buy (Kentucky), the police pepper-balling of a crowd of, wait for it, Target customers (Virginia) and sporadic online accounts of fights over suspected queue jumping. One teenager was also rushed to hospital following a PS3-related stabbing, though uniquely the knifeman was the PS3 owner and the victim the aspiring thief. Elsewhere, at Wal-Mart in West Bend, Wisconsin, the news that customers would be dealt with using the popular 'first come, first served' method led to a man's face being shoved into a telegraph pole.

Unsurprisingly, the initial US allocations of PS3 – estimated to be between 125,000 and 175,000 – sold out within hours; or so said a triumphant Sony press release after this critically under-supplied launch. *Resistance: Fall Of Man* (see page 68) proved the biggest-selling launch title, followed by *Madden 07*. As a mark of differing tastes, Japan's favourite was *Ridge Racer 7* (reviewed on page 75), *Resistance* coming second. Sony also noted PS3's halo effect over associated products, with week-on-week US sales of PSP rising 29 per cent at the company's top five retailers (for the week ending November 20), with PS2 enjoying similar success.

You could say that November 19, merely two days on from PS3's US release, saw the launch of the competition. But as if to quantify the Nintendo difference, or at least its difference in target demographic, Wii entered the world via the Times Square branch of Toys R Us. Following a countdown festival of live music and Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics, NOA president Reggie Fils-Aime took to the tills to greet midnight's first wave





In a rather embarrassing start to PS3's campaign, the recipient of the first unit sold by Yurakucho's Bic Camera was shepherded on to stage for a tête-à-tête with SCE president Ken Kutaragi. The twist: he didn't speak Japanese, opting instead to shrug his shoulders and beat a hasty retreat. Reports suggest that he, like many, bought zero games







of adopters. A similar event held at Los Angeles' Universal CityWalk attracted queues of an estimated 1,000 people, the EBGames outlet involved handing out wristbands as guarantees of available units, a system also adopted elsewhere.

The largely successful distribution of Wii to retail – a testament to Fils-Aime's earlier assurance that 'supply is demand' – has since been credited with the lack of reported animosity among Wii consumers. At the two launch parties, Segways fitted with HDTVs and consoles would pull up alongside the queuing customers and offer hands-on previews of Wii titles, the assembled crowds predictably more diverse than those attending Sony's events of the previous week, and moreover Microsoft's of the previous year. Nintendo officials would later confirm that 600,000 Wiis were sold during its first eight days in North America, with cumulative sales of console, accessories and firstparty games totalling $190 million (£96 million). The next milestone for the company was to sell a million consoles in the territory by early December, a figure expected to double by the second week of January, bringing the global estimate to four million units.

Achieving that target depends, of course, on figures from Wii's Japanese and European launches, neither of which were available at the time of **Edge** going to press. Logical assumptions based on preorder sales, however, are positive. In November, as the first preorder slots for Wii became available, Japanese online store and auction website Rakuten filled 300 in three minutes, an experience echoed throughout the Japanese internet. Without prior announcement, an employee of Akihabara's Sofmap store was among the first to place a pre-order sign in a Tokyo storefront, a 300-strong queue forming almost immediately outside.

A 'substandard' score for *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* in Weekly Famitsu – the series' standard being a perfect 40, the new game scoring 38 – may have had local commentators questioning the potential knock-on effect for Wii's popularity, but the selling out of all 400,000 allocated units before launch showed little cause for panic, unless of course you were without a guaranteed unit. Rather sensibly, several retailers handed out tickets to preorder customers together with an invitation to come back after launch and simply pick one up. December 2 saw a contrast of a different kind emerge between the Japanese

Pick ups

Inevitable delays struck each of the launches. Here, however, are the games that made it

PS3 US:
- Resistance: Fall Of Man
- Call Of Duty 3
- Ridge Racer 7
- Need For Speed Carbon
- Madden NFL 07
- Gundam: Target In Sight
- NBA 07
- NHL 2K7
- Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom
- Sonic The Hedgehog
- Tony Hawk's Project 8
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

PS3 JAPAN:
- Resistance: Fall Of Man
- Ridge Racer 7
- Genji: Days Of The Blade
- Miyazato Sankyoudai Naizou Mahjong Taikai IV
- Mahjong Fight Club
- Sega Golf Club
- Gundam: Target In Sight

Wii US:
- Avatar: The Last Airbender
- Call Of Duty 3
- Cars
- Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2
- Excite Truck
- Grim Adventures Of Billy & Mandy
- GT Pro Series
- Happy Feet
- The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess
- Marvel: Ultimate Alliance
- Madden NFL 07
- Monster 4x4 World Circuit
- Rampage: Total Destruction
- Rayman Raving Rabbids
- Red Steel
- Spongebob Squarepants: Creature From The Krusty Krab
- Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz
- Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam
- Trauma Center: Second Opinion
- Wii Sports

Wii JAPAN:
- Trauma Center: Second Opinion
- Crayon Shin-Chan
- Elebits
- Ennichi No Tatsujin
- Kororinpa
- Necro-Nesia
- WarioWare: Smooth Moves
- Red Steel
- SD Gundam: Scad Hammers
- Super Monkey Ball Banana Blitz
- Super Swing Golf PangYa
- Tamagochi No Pikapika Daitouryou!
- The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess
- Wii Sports
- Wii Play
- Wing Island



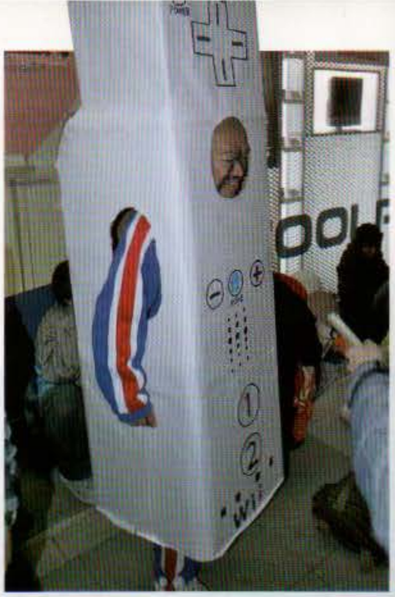
The absence of security personnel at the chief venues for PS3's Japanese launch led to some heated exchanges at the front of queues, where room to breathe was at a premium



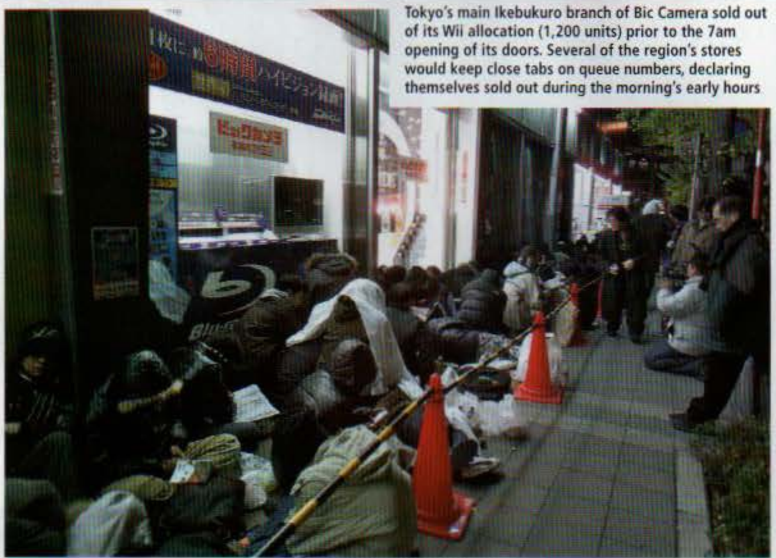
Magic bullet

Some words of warning to Wii owners: don't sweat it

Promising a revolution in technical support enquiries (though there's little mystery involved), the early reports of Wii hardware problems are sending shivers through recently enfranchised HD gamers, as well as owners of antique ceramics, patio doors and small animals. Nintendo clearly underestimated the bowling arms (and sweat glands) of its audience when manufacturing the Remote's wrist strap, the harrowing consequences now visible at www.wiihaveaproblem.com. Interestingly, reports suggest that many players become so immersed that they release their grip having bowled a virtual ball. Plans for an official replacement to the so-called 'crap strap' have yet to be announced, though some form of thirdparty insurance is sure to appear before long.







Tokyo's main Ikebukuro branch of Bic Camera sold out of its Wii allocation (1,200 units) prior to the 7am opening of its doors. Several of the region's stores would keep close tabs on queue numbers, declaring themselves sold out during the morning's early hours



Newswire

CBS presents... gaming

Four issues ago (E167) we covered Prizefight TV's bid to take gaming mainstream through satellite television. Now the big money's cottoned on the potential of pro-gaming TV in the form of CBS. The American network will air They Got Game: Stars of the World Series of Video Games on December 30. Although not exactly primetime (it's on at 3pm) the significance of such a major media outlet giving over an hour to gaming is evidence of a growing popular acceptance. Games featured include *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, *Project Gotham Racing 3* and, of course, *Counter-Strike*. It will be hosted by MTV VJ Quddus.

Neither Wii nor PS3 managed to wholly fulfil their anticipated launch line-ups, though delays had been warned of for some time in advance

launches, few foreign resellers (though a visible contingent of recruited homeless people) populating the Wii queues, and few of the evening's 8,500 Yahoo auctions selling for considerable profit, if at all. Average peripheral purchases on the day included two games, a Classic Controller and a second set of Remote and Nunchuk. With *Wii Play* (*Hajimete No Wii*) bundled in with additional Remotes, estimates suggest the latter to have challenged *Twilight Princess* for the top of initial sales charts, *Odoru Made In Wario* following close behind.

Fallout from both launches comprised, as always, mixed opinions, unexpected findings and hurried official words. Neither Wii nor PS3 managed to wholly fulfil their anticipated launch line-ups, though delays had been warned of for some time in advance. On average, the games for both platforms met as lukewarm a reception as you'd expect for a first wave, flagship titles such as *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and *Twilight Princess* both standing out. Notably, North American sales figures for the latter totalled 454,000 units, accounting for roughly 75 per cent of the territory's adopted Wii hardware. At the other end of the spectrum, the response to Ubisoft's *Red Steel* was disparaging enough to bring Fils-Aime rushing to its side, downplaying negative reviews as 'overly harsh'.

Wii adopters would also discover holes in the machine's feature-set, which earned a frank apology from its manufacturer. Absent from its online hub were both news and weather channels, the former rescheduled to debut on January 27, the latter slightly earlier on December 20. The Opera web browser should be available as a beta download in late December, with a finished version arriving in March and remaining a free download until June.

Auspiciously, PS3's P-TV video download service arrived for its Japanese launch almost without issue, its collection of movie trailers and anime clips



Sony's previously stated aim of 'airlifting in' PS3s has at least made acquiring one post-launch slightly less than impossible



Despite the tales of woe (and beatings) reported in several US states, the majority of the country's early PS3 adopters endured the anxious wait patiently and peacefully. Some stores, however, left it until perilously late to inform queues that they weren't welcome outside



The potentially magnificent *MotorStorm* (bottom) was sorely missed by both PS3 launches, the Japanese queues treated to the frankly diabolical *Gundam: Target In Sight*. That title's stubborn popularity in the country, however, was borne out by its decent sales





available without charge. But that didn't preclude an early kick start for the widely anticipated firmware updates that are, over time, expected to fix and enhance the XMB interface just as Microsoft's has 360's. First, there was the incremental patch that launched alongside the machine, adding support for the PlayStation Network service. Then, still prior to the US launch, a second update would bolster backend security and bring several enhancements to media playback, PSP interoperability and user diagnostics. Future patches aim to address problems with the machine's hardware-enabled backwards compatibility, some 200 of the 8,000+ supported titles having been found to experience issues during its first weeks on sale.

Having been quietly promoted at TGS, the PS1 titles chosen for PSP emulation began their trickle on to PlayStation Network on December 4. Available at $7.99 (£4.50) each, the first to appear were *Crash Bandicoot*, *Cool Boarders*, *Hot Shots Golf*, *Syphon Filter* and *Tekken 2*. To ensure that PSP held up its end of the bargain when the time came, November's firmware update was mirrored by the release of the handheld's long-anticipated firmware version 3.0. As well as providing the emulator software itself, the update allowed PSP users to control the PS3 XMB remotely, adding support for the wifi streaming of music and video, and the sharing of PS3's messaging service.

PS3's European launch, meanwhile, remains pencilled in for a delayed arrival in March. Thanks to the consistent strength of the Pound and Euro against the Yen, it has been suggested that Sony might remarkably offset up to four years' worth of manufacturing costs when that time comes, assuming of course that someone else doesn't woo their customers first.

Microsoft, naturally, hasn't remained mute during its rivals' festivities, with an attempt to dominate airwaves on both sides of the Atlantic recently by buying seven minutes of consecutive ad time during ESPN's SportsCenter broadcast, and seeing the timely release of further *Halo 3* teaser footage. When discussing the gaming potential of music player Zune, which launched in the US on November 14, Microsoft entertainment president **Robbie Bach** suggested Sony was "spread too thin," fighting wars on both home and handheld gaming fronts. Xbox 360, he'd go on to say, was the "logical choice" for consumers this season.

Behind the remarks, however, which also included **Bill Gates**' well-founded belief that "Sony could make 80,000 bricks, and people would buy them," Microsoft must realise that it has slipped somewhat during its year-long head start, embroiling itself in a battle between HD-DVD and Blu-ray, and allowing its focus to drift to subjects such as 1080p support and full-length multimedia downloads. In a sense, it's succumbed to Sony's bid to make next-gen a matter of time rather than place, coming first without necessarily proving itself different. As expected, it's going to be some months before the gap between the two platforms can be accurately measured, leaving us instead to marvel at the launch period's clear and present contrast – the Nintendo difference.





Last minute rumours suggesting the delay of Konami's *Elebits* (left) were disproved by the title's day one arrival on Japanese shelves; the US, however, went without. Meanwhile, Ubisoft's *Red Steel* (right) justified fears of lacklustre level design and Remote implementation



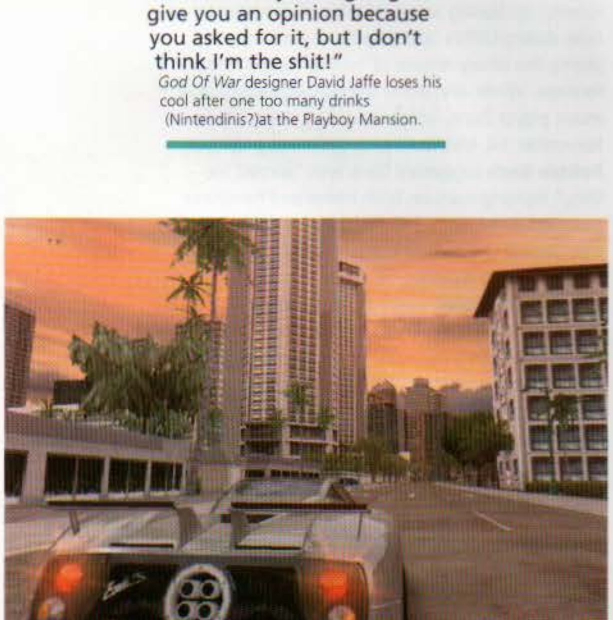
SOUND BYTES

Nintendini cocktails
1oz chocolate liqueur
1oz Amarula cream
1oz vodka
1oz Crème de Cacao
Simply pour all ingredients into an ice-filled cocktail shaker, shake well then pour into chilled martini glasses
Glamour magazine sends us straight to the bar, as part of its highly excitable Wii advertorial

"We think that Game Boy Advance certainly has at least one more holiday season left in it. For us, it continues to be a great stepping stone for five, six, seven-year-old consumers"
Nintendo of America's Reggie Fils-Aime sends the handheld off with a round of seasonal cheer.

"Are there people in Microsoft who have PS2s? The answer is yes. And that's OK. Are there people at Microsoft that have GameCubes? The answer is almost certainly yes. It's not a manhood test."
Microsoft's Robbie Bach reassures the public that working at his company is not an Orwellian nightmare for console owners.

"I just do the best I can. When these guys come up and shove a microphone in my face and say 'whaddya think?' maybe I have a healthy enough ego to give you an opinion because you asked for it, but I don't think I'm the shit!"
God Of War designer David Jaffe loses his cool after one too many drinks (Nintendinis?)at the Playboy Mansion.



Test Drive Unlimited's arrival on PS2 (scheduled for February, and previewed on p35), may be one of the last truly ambitious multi-platform titles ported to a last-gen machine. It will be interesting to see if its sales makes other publishers regret abandoning them

HARDWARE

What next for the last generation?

With few high-profile titles scheduled for 2007, how soon will PlayStation 2 become a dead duck console?

Outside of design documents, the games industry doesn't concern itself with mythology. But, stuck on the cusp of console transition, certain executives could do worse than consider the Roman deity Janus. For, appropriately, the god of gates and doors, and namesake of the month of January, also deals with beginnings and endings.

And with the final major territory next-gen console release soon over, that's exactly where we are. Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Wii are the current generation. But where does that leave Xbox, GameCube and PlayStation 2, about which Sony is still releasing congratulatory press releases; the latest being 40 million sold in PAL territories?

Around half the 110 million PS2s in the world will either be mothballed or passed down to younger siblings who have little inclination or cash to purchase games

It's more than a semantic discussion. Taking the most ambitious predictions of Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo, by March 2007 the combined global install base of their new machines will be less than 20 million. In comparison, there are 110 million or so PlayStation 2s, 24 million Xboxes and 21 million GameCubes in dens, bedrooms and cupboards around the world.

In terms of pure numbers, therefore, the old generation should provide a much larger market for several years to come. So why is there always such a rush towards the new machines?

"New is attractive and exciting, especially when it is attached to better graphics and the marketing spend of the next generation, but it has to be balanced with patience for the user base to grow," reckons **Jason Kingsley**, CEO of Rebellion, which experienced late success with PS1 versions of various *Rainbow Six* games after PS2 was released.

"I think many people began to abandon PlayStation 2 too early," Kingsley adds. "But I've noticed several companies doing profit and loss calculations based on next-gen game sales, going pale and then reconsidering its huge installed base."

According to industry analyst **Nick Parker**, who has worked for Nintendo and Sony, the crucial factor for publishers to gauge is the rate at which old machines shift to the bedroom, before finally being re-boxed on the top of cupboards.

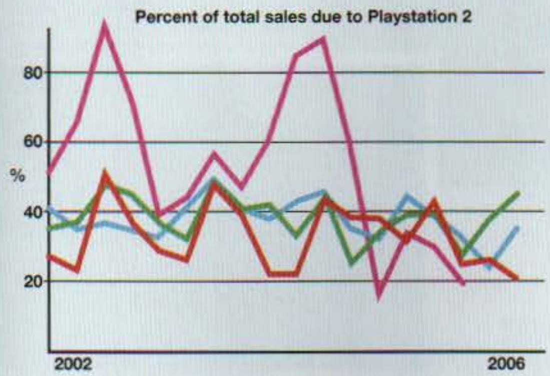
"You have to remember there's a sharp drop in a console's activity rate when a new one comes along," he says. Even now, it's reckoned around half of the 110 million PlayStation 2s in the world will either be mothballed or in the process of being passed down to younger siblings who have little inclination or cash to regularly purchase new games. "The rate will be even lower on those consoles which didn't perform so well," Parker says.

This is particularly the case for Xbox, as Microsoft encouraged publishers to drop it in favour of 360. One calculation, based on the transition between PS1 and PS2, suggests by doing

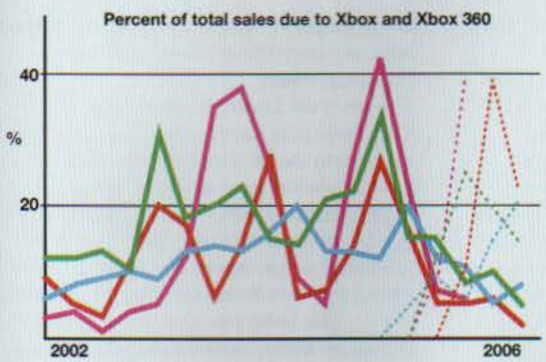








Looking back over the past four years of PlayStation 2, it's consistently been the largest market sector for the big publishers, comprising around a third of their overall sales. For Take Two, the *GTA* series means its sales have been almost totally dominated by PS2. And while the financial peaks are slowly slipping by a couple of percentage points every quarter, it will remain a substantial market for years to come



When it comes to Xbox transition, the decline is much more severe than would be expected as Microsoft actively encouraged publishers to switch to 360 development, which is much more profitable for the computing giant. This has worked well for the publishers too, with the 360 already a substantial part of their platform breakdown



God of War II (above) is likely the last big PS2 exclusive, while games such as *Rogue Galaxy, Okami* and *Final Fantasy XII* (top, left to right) will also keep European sales buoyant in 2007. In the long term sales will be dominated by licensed games from the likes of EA and THQ

so around $150 million (£76 million) in Xbox game sales was 'lost' in 2006. However, not all of these sales will have been completely lost to the industry due to the compensating factor of a fast 360 uplift.

It is, of course, PS2 that's the crucial platform, because big publishers such as EA, Activision, THQ and Take Two currently make over a third of their total revenues on PlayStation 2 sales. For example, EA released 24 PlayStation 2 games in 2004, 27 in 2005 and 28 in 2006. That supply of *Need For Speeds, Maddens, FIFAs* and *Tiger Woods* games won't be turned off overnight.

But with *God Of War II* its last big exclusive, plus a smattering of Japanese laggards such as *Okami, Final Fantasy XII* and *Rogue Galaxy* for us Europeans, it's clear the type of games available for the platform will start to downshift.

"I doubt you'll find much new [original] development on PlayStation 2," Parker says. "Games will either be licensed product or multiplatform sequels."

He concedes, however, that canny operators could find new niches. "The interesting thing is that a market emerges of consumers under the age of 15, who haven't had access to the console before," he says. "If you can bring in licences which target that audience, it could work well, but I'd never advise a publisher to invest in a licence for PlayStation 2 and try chasing new 20-something gamers now."

Another factor is the likelihood of a PS2 price cut. If well managed by Sony, US market analyst **Simon Price** reckons it will strengthen the PS2 software market well into 2008. "PlayStation 2 hardware sales are holding up a lot more strongly than PS1 did at a similar stage in its lifecycle," he says. "There's room for another price cut, maybe even two, meaning a long tail is in prospect for games sales at the budget end of the market.

One group keen to take up the opportunity are budget publishers. "A lot of the big publishers have to be seen to be going next-gen, but for us, PS2 will continue to be major revenue stream for the next 18 months to two years," says **Paul Benjamin**, marketing manager at Xplosiv. He agrees, though, that the type of games released will constrict. "While the PlayStation 2 install base is huge, it won't equate to past software sales. Only certain genres will be successful," he says.

Kingsley thinks PS2 could be around longer though. "I would imagine there will be a PS2 market for several years yet, possibly until just before PlayStation 4 is announced, going on what happened to PS1," he says.

After all, even a fraction of 110 million is a very big number.

OUT THERE



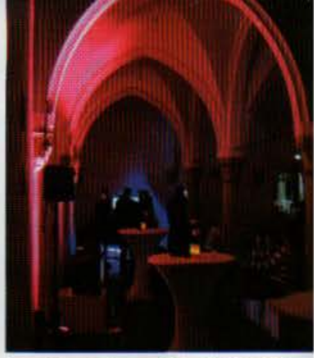
WIINDOWS XP

It was certainly part of Nintendo's remit when designing the Wii to encourage gamers to get creative with its innovative new controls. But ever since the release of the system, people have been finding uses for the Wii of which its manufacturer may not strictly approve. Chief amongst these is software designer Carl Kenner's GlovePIE, a downloadable executable file for Windows XP that allows users to harness the Wii remote as a wireless peripheral in place of a mouse. Provided your computer has Bluetooth, Kenner's web site promises that you'll be able to control either 'PC or emulated games'. This follows the charming discovery that the Wii's sensor bar can easily be replaced by two candles thanks to the way the Remote uses infra-red to determine its position. According to several reports, the candles are said to be a reliable – and ever so romantic – replacement for Nintendo's official hardware.

• carl.kenner.googlepages.com/glovepie







No conference is complete without a party. NLGD06's played host to the Spill Group Game Awards, which rewarded healthcare-focused serious game projects by students



Playing Dutch

Nederlandse Gamedagen is a little known event. But could Utrecht belong on the international games industry calendar?



The conference was held in the 11th-century Janskerk church in Utrecht. It seems a rather sombre place to talk gaming, but was warm and welcoming

It translates, happily, as Dutch Game Days, a refreshingly simple name for a refreshingly straightforward gaming event. In its second year, NLGD brings together those interested in games – academics, developers, students, technologists, advertisers – to discuss the future, and what part Holland will play in it.

Beyond arguing about the *Killzone 2* trailer (the game is being made in Amsterdam by Sony-owned Guerilla), you may not have thought much about the Dutch games industry before, which is fair enough, since there isn't much of it to think about.

This civic funded, socially minded, academically made, creatively ambitious freebie is the perfect poster boy for a fledgling national industry

Indeed, the last Dutch game covered in **Edge** was in issue 167, when *The Blob*, a *Katamari*-inspired not-so-serious game created by students from Utrecht's University and School of the Arts featured as internet game of the month. But, as the main event of NLGD06 – a two-day conference – unfolded, it became clear that this civic funded, socially minded, academically made, creatively ambitious freebie is the perfect poster boy for a fledgling national industry. And not least because its cult success has lead to a number of established publishers approaching the team to discuss a commercial release.

As Pjotr van Schothorst, from Vstep, talked about developing games to help train firefighters, and plans to use his company's *Ship Simulator* game to function as an archive for historic Dutch vessels threatened with the scrapyard, a picture emerged of a country rapidly waking up to the potential of serious games. As Utrecht School of the Arts professor Jeroen van Mastrigt advocated his passionate belief that game structures could one day be used to motivate and direct human behaviour in all areas of life, and described how his MA course in game design and development is designed accordingly (complete with Easter eggs), it demonstrated the dynamism with which the Dutch academic communicty had adopted gaming as a serious subject of study. As Martin de Ronde (ex Guerilla, now Media Republic) detailed how *Eccky* (a Tamagotchi-style MSN Messenger plug-in game) allows friends to raise virtual babies together, and how those babies came to be given away free in packs of Doritos, it became clear that business, in Holland and beyond, is looking for a more innovative approach from its videogame partners than simply providing in-game billboard space. And, as engineer Fred van Houten explained his project T-Xchange – a virtual lab which uses game technology to prototype and test new products and services – it showed the willingness of Dutch industry to seriously engage with the potential of videogames.

For those familiar with the established game industries in the UK, US, Japan and France, it's easy to dismiss the fledgling growth of Dutch developers. But while they may not have years of experience or a wide talent pool, they also have the advantage of being free from old-school prejudices and bitter experiences of failed projects. Older industries may have to stay sharp – perhaps by attending events such as these – to ensure they maintain their lead.



The conference was hosted by twins Hector and Alexander Fernandez, who head up Streamline Studios – currently at work on a trick-based basketball game, *Hoopworld*, for Live Arcade



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Publicising his own book of the same name, Village Voice critic Ed Halter's blog From Sun-Tzu to Xbox is primarily a sounding board for discussing the portrayal of war in games. Managing to tackle political and social issues without descending into pretentiousness, the site's also peppered with good-humoured stories from the wider game community.

That games have been used to great effect in military quarters is no surprise (*America's Army* being the best-known example), but Halter's site documents just how much virtual scenarios have been relied upon in recent years to test actual tactical strategies on the ground. Whether this use of gaming in life or death situations is progress or simply just frightening is what's up for debate.

Still in its infancy (it's updated an average of once a week), the site also takes an academic look at the history of both war and gaming, focusing on where both collide.

Site:
From Sun-Tzu to Xbox
URL:
http://warandvideogames.typepad.com/

SOFTWARE



PS3 gets YDL

Amongst its many capabilities the PS3 sports Yellow Dog Linux support, but how's it gone down since being released?

In the EU at least, Sony failed to convince tax authorities that the PS2 was a computer and not a games console, costing millions in duties. With the PS3, the definition's likely be far more contentious thanks to the ability of the machine's system software to install Yellow Dog Linux – a Sony-approved operating system launched exclusively to the Yellow Dog community on November 27.

Offering the opportunity to use over 2,000 applications, the OS will bring PC staples such as web browsers, media players and office software to the PS3 in the most comprehensive convergence of home computers and home consoles yet available.

In terms of office capabilities, Yellow Dog Linux provides full support for the free multiplatform OpenOffice, which contains a full suite of Microsoft Office-compatible applications: a word processor and spreadsheet program to name but a few. Web browsers such as Firefox are also available, and PS3's USB keyboard support should ease their use.

Commentators already using the system have been impressed with how it handles simple tasks, but say that an overall lack of memory on the PS3's part hinders media playback. This will be exacerbated by the fact that few major media players offer Linux support.

If word processing and media playback leave you cold, more enticing is the possibility of running emulators and potentially MAME on your PS3. There's still no sign of compatible ports (Yellow Dog is yet to release the Cell SDK, and access to the PS3's GPU is blocked), but it's surely – hopefully – only a matter of time.



Releasing the product over three stages means that Yellow Dog Linux will reach the vast majority of users in 2007. Although it was released in DVD format on December 11, most will wait until it is freely downloadable at the end of 2006. Other systems confirmed to work on PS3 include Fedora Core 5 and Gentoo

Continue

The sound of silence
Both Wii and PS3 are the soul of discretion

Christmas gaming
Settling in with Zelda, Viva, Tony and Marcus

Mary Louise Parker
Graduating from DS to PS2 in the new series of Weeds

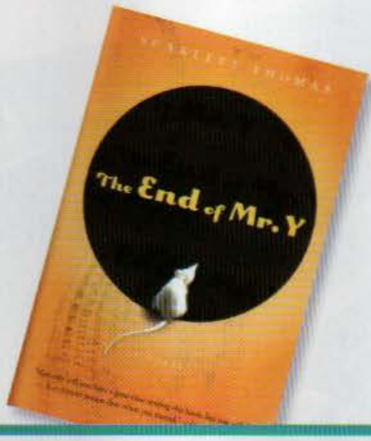
Quit

Blood blisters
Why must opening 360 pad blister packs end in tears?

Christmas games
Inevitable, inescapable and inexplicably crappy

Alan Yentob
Another high-brow pundit finally notices Second Life

Author: Scarlett Thomas
Publisher: Harcourt
ISBN: 0 15 603161 2



THE END OF MR Y

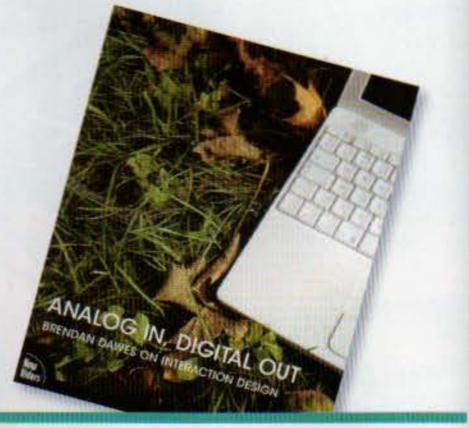
The conscious world reflected through a metaphysical shadow realm is the fabric of Thomas' engrossing drama

Technology seldom features in mainstream literature and games even less so. For that reason, referencing Sega's Dreamcast in her short story as part of the All Hail The New Puritans collection in 2000 marked out Scarlett Thomas as an author in tune with current culture. She's by no means a hard technologist though; something demonstrated in The End Of Mr Y, a novel that twists together themes of cyberspace, global consciousness, Victorian freak shows and dead-end academia.

Sitting uncomfortably at the centre is Ariel Manto, a wayward PhD student researching an obscure, obsessive novelist, while simultaneously trying to find her way in a world of bad sex and freezing bedsits. When she stumbles across The End Of Mr Y, a rare book written by the subject of her research, Ariel's existence is twisted back on itself as she enters the Troposphere. This is a mysterious place where you can jump between the minds of men and animals, as well as travelling through time, and it's not long before other agencies are interested in the power of her discovery.

It's at this point that the action shifts from the leisurely discussion of Derrida and Heidegger, plus a smattering of cod relativity, to a more straightforward chase, albeit one involving translations in mind, space and time. Indeed, spiced with a dash of theology and a touch of romance, The End Of Mr Y weaves just about every facet of pop culture (PlayStation excluded), into what is a scintillating read.

Author: Brendan Dawes
Publisher: New Riders
ISBN: 0 321 42916 8



ANALOG IN, DIGITAL OUT

Creative director Dawes' lateral take on technology is merged with a user-centric approach to digital design

When it comes to interactive design, there's always a temptation to be channelled by the obvious technological options, rather than creating something that's human-shaped. Think Sony's Sixaxis versus the Wii Remote. In many ways, they provide a similar control method, but one is shaped by what has gone before while the other breaks out of such convention with its innovative mix of ergonomics and downright fun.

It's the sort of thing Brendan Dawes, the creative director of Manchester-based new media design agency magneticNorth, calls Mariah Carey syndrome: just because you have a five-octave range doesn't mean you always have to use it. He's more interested in the inspiration that most people ignore. He'd rather go to the supermarket and see how people interact with space and products than hang around the ICA. So as the book's title suggests, this is a personal exploration of how we can make sure we're not losing the analogue, flesh-and-blood world within the increasingly suffocating digital skin of 21st-century life.

Of course, it helps if, like Dawes, you're a bit of a fiddler, in terms of knocking up bits of code or using a soldering iron and screwdriver to reskin his boring USB hub in the fabric of an old Atari 2600 joystick. Similarly, a 20-minute wait at LAX sees Dawes tapping away on his iBook to create a motion-sensitive graph of passenger movements via his iSight camera. You'll find plenty of inspiration in Analog In, Digital Out.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Trackmania United

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** 93 GAMES



Riding high after 20 million free downloads of *Nations*, Nadeo's series continues its cursor-controlled cruise to the front of the PC's arcade pack, adding 200 new tracks to its historic collection

Fatal Inertia

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



The slip from initial release date and associated problems with UE3 tech haven't reduced the scope of Koei's physics-laden racer, stablemate *Bladestorm* also hovering across to Microsoft territory

Armored Core 4

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** FROM SOFTWARE



Opting to flee the dead cities and crippling framerate of the TGS demo, the new trailer skates and blazes across seas and meadows with nary a dropped frame, though plenty of bolt-on accessories

Super Smash Bros Brawl

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



Vague enthusiasms meet screens and trailer in Masahiro Sakurai's latest addition to the running development blog. Visually, if the posed renders are any sign, expect a step forward from *Melee*

Virtua Fighter 5

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Some hands-on time reveals no considerable difference between coin-op and conversion, with backdrops and character models arguably better on PS3. Additional features have yet to be seen

Bubble Bobble Double Shot

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** RISING STAR



Embracing both the DS naming convention and the style of later arcade versions (specifically *Symphony*), this episode introduces colour-coded enemies and, controversially, new character Bubu

Huxley

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** WEBZEN



The GSTAR show's first in-game glimpse of Webzen's MMOFPS suggests a greater debt to *Unreal* than engine tech. Not-as-heavy metal textures no doubt keep the networked action up to speed

Dynamite Deka EX: Asian Dynamite

FORMAT: SEGA **PUBLISHER:** ARCADE



Raiding the pantry for another improbable scrap, the grandson of Saturn's (retitled) *Die Hard Arcade* and son of Dreamcast's crazed sequel lands in Tokyo as a Lindbergh test unit. Conversion, please

Final Fantasy XII Revenant Wings

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX



A juicier prospect than another *VII*-associated dirge, the DS companion to **Edge** award-winning *FFXII* favours pint-sized bursts of play, summon-heavy battles, and all-round dual screen support



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Titanion

http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/ttn_e.html

Kenta Cho, in between sustaining his relentless stream of exhausting esoteric freebie shmups, seems to have invented time travel. Turn on *Titanion*, focus in, and some crucial element of the universe seems to fold in on itself. One momentary infinity later, you're dead, a new high-score is recorded, and the only sense of time having passed comes from how desperately your eyes need to blink.

With each successive iteration, and each successive experimentation with the core shmup structure, Kenta Cho's games get harder to judge. *Titanion*, not quite so visually stimulating as some of its siblings, adds a Classic mode in which your secondary weapon captures opponent ships and adds them to your formation, and Modern which converts that weapon to a 'provocation beam' eliciting more bullets, and thereby more points, from enemies. As ever, that simple rule change produces two entirely separate experiences, which only share the relentless, overwhelming wash of speed, light, sound, death and elation which all his games produce.





There may be Linux and there may be Cell, but Sony hasn't had the easiest time communicating PS3's rich feature-set to potential customers. Many still see a 360 decked in cheaper plastic and black gloss, an impression that's sure to change over time

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

The PS3: we have launch!

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on the arrival of a new console



On November 11, the PS3 launched in Japan. According to our figures at Famitsu, 88,000 units were available to buy during the first seven days. That was several weeks ago and, as I write, 170,000 units have been shipped and sold so far – and 60 per cent of these are 60GB models. In Tokyo, people are still queuing up to buy the PS3, despite the fact that the machine is constantly selling out, while outside of the big city some 20GB versions remain unsold.

So what does all this tell us about the PS3 in Japan? Historically, most new platforms have sold more than million units in a very short period of time. Even considering its high price tag, the PS3 should have done the same. It seems that most gamers remain of the opinion that it's just too expensive for them, and it's this reaction to the machine that's perhaps been the most telling.

There's also a trend, which seems to be on the increase, of people queuing to buy the latest popular consoles and games with the sole intention of selling them on, purely for profit. The great majority of this activity originates from people in Asia, who employ homeless people to do their bidding. Or they use foreigners, very few of whom speak a single word of Japanese. Not only do these people have absolutely no passion for gaming, but they also display terrible manners while they're queuing, provoking bad feeling among ordinary buyers who want the console for legitimate reasons. PS3s bought in this way mainly go to overseas markets, via online auction sites, where they're sold for several times what they're worth. Real gamers are left empty-handed, which is sad.

So if the PS3 is hard to find, what about the games? There were seven titles available at launch. Most popular was *Ridge Racer 7* (selling 56,000 copies) closely followed by *Gundam: Target In Sight* (55,000). *Resistance* came third (33,000), with *Genji* trailing behind (17,000). *Mahjong Fight Club*, *Sega Gold Club* and *Mahjong Taikai V* all fared badly, selling less than 10,000 copies each. In total, 167,000 games had been sold. This means that 98

Not only do they have absolutely no passion for gaming, but they also display terrible manners while they're queuing, provoking bad feeling among ordinary buyers who want the console for legitimate reasons







The use of the sub-par *Gundam: Target In Sight* as a storefront showcase didn't put off the overnight queuers, but for some it was more about the resale value than the games





Photography: Hiroki Izumi



per cent of PS3s were sold with only one game – a worrying statistic for such an anticipated console. I personally thought *Ridge* and *Genji* were well thought through in terms of content, and I'm surprised that *Resistance* is so complete and accomplished. It's amazing, considering it's a launch title, though I did notice some issues with game balance. Still, *Resistance* seems perfectly pitched to promote the PS3 in North American and European territories, even if competing with the likes of *Halo 3* on the 360 seems too big a task. *Gundam* is a franchise that especially excites Japanese fans. I'm afraid that this time around, though, they may be disappointed by the PS3's *Target In Sight*, which is a shame because it seemed like *Gundam* titles had been increasing in quality recently.

What about the PS3's non-gaming functions? There still aren't any particularly appealing Blu-ray movies on the market. Unlike DVDs, however, Japanese and US region codes are the same for this format, so we can expect great movies to reach the Japanese market much faster than before. Despite little or nothing being known about the PS3's online functionality before launch, it's working very well. Downloading games and creating friends lists is easily done, though unsurprisingly – because it's such an established service – 360's Live still provides a better network experience in general.

With too few units available, however, the PS3 has had a hard time delivering its various experiences to gamers who really want them. The big question is how it's going to perform against the Wii, especially considering that Nintendo made far more units ready for sale at launch. Overall, I anticipate an improvement in the PS3's situation by the end of the year – it'll be exciting to see what the beginning of 2007 will bring.



Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway



Call Of Duty **may display the brutal relentlessness of WW2, but the melancholic emotional storylines and soliloquies of** ***Brothers*** **are a far more realistic prospect for many**
360, PC, PS3, UBISOFT

Mass Effect



It's been a long drought since the last Bioware epic, and fond memories of ***KOTOR*** **and** ***Baldur's Gate*** **can only sharpen our thirst for Shepard's stellar adventures**
360, MICROSOFT

MotorStorm



Even when stuck with just one controller and just one track, ***MotorStorm*** **still outshines every PS3 launch title. The finished article could yet prove a true killer app**
PS3, SCEE

Parallel horizons

East doesn't meet west. Or does it?



No More Heroes **is Grasshopper Manufacture's new sword-wielding, free-roaming Wii project. But will it fare better than a similarly-styled cultural magpie, the disappointing** ***Red Steel*****?**

It's the stuff of late-night conversations, when scratchy eyes and cramped thumbs mean the console is turned off and idle speculation turned on: what if Capcom made a *GTA*? What if EA ripped off Nintendo? What if western game developers and eastern game developers actually embraced each other's culture rather than just cherry-pick a title or two to pepper their own late-night conversations, when eyes are scratchy and thumbs cramped.

Of course, individual developers are often passionately omnivorous when it comes to their personal gaming tastes, but there's no denying that decisions taken at a studio and publisher level mean that, in most cases, it's still possible to tell a game's provenance at a glance. And, while few have an appetite for a blandly homogenous global gaming culture, there's no doubt that an inward-looking development community risks missing out on new ideas, techniques and stylistic approaches which could enrich their games.

But things seem set to change. Those two what ifs are in fact what nexts: EA's new *Sims* title is being developed for Wii by a Japanese studio, and looks (as you can see on p34) rather closely inspired by *Animal Crossing*. And Capcom, following on from its own domestic publication of the *GTA* games, is planning its own PS2 free-roaming crime caper (see p35), albeit one in which you uphold the law. Nor are they alone. Suda 51, leader of Grasshopper Manufacture, names Rockstar as a prime inspiration behind his new Wii slasher *No More Heroes* (p38) and Buena Vista, the newly-energised arm of Disney responsible for videogames, is trying for a double whammy: hiring Japanese developers Neptune to produce a *Pokémon*-style DS game – *Spectrobes* (p33) – which seems primarily aimed at western audiences.

It's a sign of how far there is to go that the appearance of just four cross-cultural games in one issue is worthy of note. While some genres do transcend national boundaries (football, wrestling, racing, MMOs, sims) many still adhere to old divisions (the east maintains its stranglehold on 2D puzzlers, 3D fighters, shmups and survival horror, the west its dominance in FPSes, RTSes and god games). So, back to that conversation: what if Capcom made an RTS? What if EA ripped off Treasure?



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E167**

DIRT: Colin McRae Off-Road

Codemasters' next journey takes it further, but above all, deeper. Mother Nature, meet Neon



Always the trendsetter and never the clone, *DIRT* won't be providing a photo mode for those enamoured by its lush terrain. It's a pity: some of the views during the fast-flowing Hokkaido events are breathtaking



Parade laps are being used to fine-tune the AI for more populous races, the goal being to maintain realism while achieving a sense of driver individuality. Several of the cars we observe make an unexpected break from the racing line

Despite prodigal US driver Travis Pastrana subsequently stealing the podium, **Colin McRae**'s flip on the last bend of this year's inaugural X Games rally stole the show. Having plunged back into the Home Depot Center stadium with a half-second lead, an over-ambitious turn caught the angle of the final jump and barrel-rolled the car. A full 360 degrees later, having lurched on to four wheels in perfect position for the exiting straight, he was somehow underway with just a second lost. Modestly, he passed credit for his fame on to his true opponent on the track – the laws of physics. "You're just a passenger at that point," he conceded.

Stars, as well as tyres, seem to be aligning for the Scotsman, especially on the virtual circuit. As *MotorStorm* muddies the palates of US race fans, neither the RalliSport nor WRC licences look set to take advantage of the situation; from what we've heard (and sadly can't repeat) they might not for a good while to come. The upcoming *Sega Rally Revo* – a debut for Sega's unproven UK racing studio – has been a little too quiet since E3, and has still to write off the wreckage of its 2006 predecessor. *McRae*, meanwhile, seems to have it all: a developer of almost impeccable genre repute, a timely release date of spring 2007, a US-friendly face in the recently signed Pastrana, and enough technology in its Neon engine to drive it well into a new generation. Physics, above all, are about to do for rally in gaming what they did for it in Carson, California.

High on Codemasters' new agenda is the eradication of the preset crash, with its before-and-after crumple zones, blemishes and tearaway parts. In a technical demo that lurks in the team's office, clearly waiting to be sprung on unsuspecting journalists, one of the game's entirely rebuilt cars can be pelted, from a direction and at a pace of your choosing, by a succession of basic objects. In accordance with shape and velocity, each leaves its unique signature on the vehicle's paint and bodywork. Pounded from both ends the car gradually shrinks, its wheels deforming as each shunt reduces the grip of the surrounding rubber on the tarmac below.

This friction, generated between car and ground, remains relevant long after you surrender control. In a subsequent demonstration, it's the car that becomes the projectile, the target being the soil shaders and geometric bedrock of a work-in-progress track. A sharp descent absorbs momentum at the expense of innermost components, sending grass and dirt high into the air. A glancing one, alternatively, either rolls the vehicle or lets it slide. There's every chance, once you see the first of these infinite permutations play out, that you'll already start to lose that instinctive urge to reset to the road the moment you lose control.

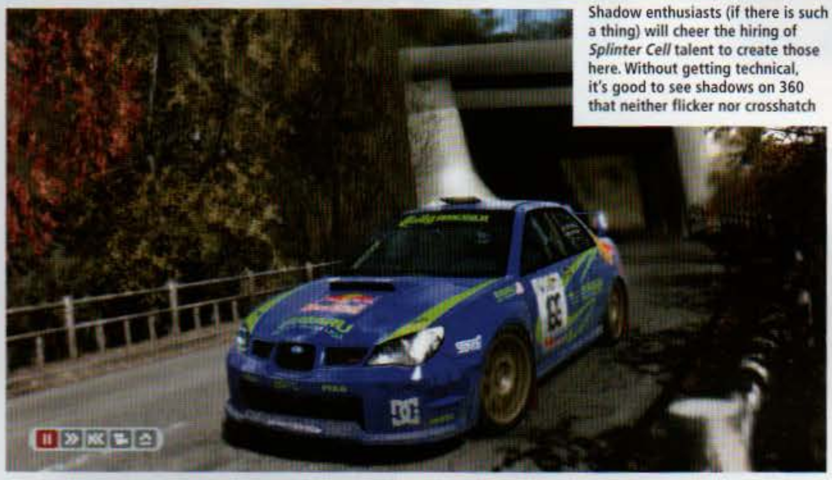
It's as if *DIRT* wants the popular prefixes of photo- and video- to become obsolete, replaced by straight realism. While it's true that a world full of accurate physics and optical effects doesn't necessarily count as a *realistic* world, here, in a genre where



So-called 'lollipop' trees were another target for HD assassination. *DIRT*'s replacements are a great deal more organic, the team even tailoring the holes in the canopy to let the optimum amount of light through







Shadow enthusiasts (if there is such a thing) will cheer the hiring of *Splinter Cell* talent to create those here. Without getting technical, it's good to see shadows on 360 that neither flicker nor crosshatch



Need for speed?

Much as the topic seems increasingly moot, it feels like dereliction of duty not to ask the *McRae* team if *DIRT* will run at 60 frames per second. The response is one you can expect to become the norm over coming months, if not further into the future, for all but the most fidgety of games. No, it won't. Two squads of developers, we're told, tested an early build at both 30fps and 60fps, concluding the influence of post-processing effects was quite enough to maintain the sensation of speed at 30, the controls remaining responsive regardless. It's worth remembering that when similar was said of *PGR3*, plenty bemoaned the decision but few contested the result.

direction simply means the difference between left and right, and drama the relationship between tyres and track, it does. Promising to include all 156 bends and associated vistas of the Pike's Peak hillclimb, its authentic tracks pander to HDR fetish as much as to geographical pedantry, but never to the point of breaking its spell. Crash barriers bend, buckle and ultimately break free from their supports; trackside flags and tape ride the slipstreams of passing cars; 3D-modelled crowd members react to drivers of different nationalities.

Benefiting from talent previously associated with *Burnout* and *Black*, *DIRT*'s new soundfield is also a world apart, even from the intricate 5.1 of *TOCA Race Driver* and earlier *McRae*s. Having been dismayed at the desolate surround channels of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, Codemasters' audio department has flooded them here. With 30Mb of samples bound to each engine for each car, *DIRT* is determined to avoid the streamed ambience and looped grunt that promises authenticity, yet seldom delivers when taken for a spin. Trackside audio now emanates from the individual objects to which it's assigned, and a crash will conjure a similarly unpredictable chorus from the various jolted parts within the car.

Crash barriers bend, buckle and break free from their supports; trackside flags ride the slipstreams of cars; crowd members react to drivers of different nationalities

While it's tempting to suggest that *McRae*'s tight chicanes have allowed Codemasters to channel its technical resources (360 is the primary platform, PC and PS3 close behind) into a denser game world than others could, that would be disingenuous. Just as the man himself broadened his horizons this year, the new *McRae* has famously expanded its tour beyond the usual gravel, asphalt and ice. Beyond the international rally championships and beat-the-clock venues you would expect, new Rally Cross events take multiple cars out on to some dustier plains. But before *MotorStorm* starts getting territorial (and, heaven knows, it's angry enough already) they're still well within the confines of *McRae*'s credibility, with AI aggression never exceeding the norms for a particular discipline, the handling models never making that arcade jump.

For those drawn in by the wow factor of Neon, there's the obvious caveat. The casual player taking a Peugeot 206 for an over-powered swerve around the track will experience no transcendent rush as the aforementioned pieces come together beneath the trigger. As much as this is *DIRT*, a title clearly in pursuit of that X audience, it's still *McRae*. Its appeal remains its fascination with cause and effect, input and response, and the conflict between the natural world and the most rugged racing machines. For those willing to stay within (and occasionally deform) those boundaries, it's sure to offer a world rich with emergent opportunity. Smash through in pursuit of something else, however, and your expectations might quickly be reset.







The environments deepen and the world widens. *DIRT*'s draw distance continues to broaden the genre's visual horizons, avoiding the usual disparity between foreground and background definition

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA LA**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Command And Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

The remnants of Westwood Studios make a concerted effort to recreate their glory days



A neat device is that of engineering. If used quickly enough, a unit of engineers can commandeer control over a fallen enemy vehicle, meaning that your own technology can ultimately be used against you



Particle effects like these show how far incidental elements in the game have improved. Surrounding environments are also pretty astounding, crumbling under the intense fire in play



Command And Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars won't redefine the RTS in the mode of *Company Of Heroes*, nor is it the kind of exponential evolution the *Total War* series manages to present with every subsequent release. But what it does, it does very well: it's a traditional, crowd-pleasing RTS that manages to introduce incremental improvements while remaining determinedly faithful to its own source material. It's easy to become blasé about such an entrenched franchise, to dismiss every new iteration as simply being more of the same, but to do so would overlook how intimate a relationship the development of each *C&C* title has with its enthusiastic fan base. Simply visiting the game's online forum reveals just how hotly anticipated this release is: one thread alone has racked up 648,000 hits. With that kind of pressure, you can understand why EA LA might not want to stray too far from the game's original blueprint.

Maintaining the series' tightly woven storyline is an important concern, one the massive online fan community is particularly passionate about. Set in a dark and apocalyptic 2047, the game focuses on a war between two factions (the Global Defence Initiative and The Brotherhood of Nod) over Tiberium – a substance that most closely resembles *Dune II*'s spice in that it's both a blessing and a curse for those who harness it. While Tiberium is incredibly toxic, it's also a valuable power resource and you'll have to harvest it in order to generate money and energy. Arriving a little way into the singleplayer game comes a third faction, whose advanced technologies seem to indicate that they're not of this world (whether this is true remains to be seen). Everything else is elementary – the sides scrap it out until one emerges victorious.

Graphically, *Command And Conquer 3* takes full advantage of increasing PC hardware capabilities, though we're slightly sceptical about how well the game will perform at EA's projected minimum system specs (a 1.8GHz processor and 512Mb RAM). Terrain is now meticulously detailed, replacing the flat-mapped textures of previous incarnations. Vehicles and buildings are also greatly improved, though the looping scripted animations that they display feel like a repetitive hangover from this game's predecessors. What really impresses are the resultant fireworks during combat – the arching neon trails of gunfire and missiles that rain down upon enemy forces being reminiscent of the kind of beautiful stylistics found in more leftfield projects such as *DefCon* and *Neon Wars*. The whole thing's wrapped up in a forgivingly simple interface



This base shows the design concept behind the mysterious 'third faction' – everything is being done to suggest that they're aliens













Toxic Tiberium manifests itself in green crystal form. Aside from fuelling the resource management aspects of *Command And Conquer 3*, Tiberium also randomises the flow of the game somewhat by forcing you to be very careful about where you decide to venture next

Set in a dark and apocalyptic 2047, the game focuses on a war between two factions over Tiberium – a substance that most closely resembles Dune II's spice

that should feel welcoming to both old and new players alike.

Fundamentally, the gameplay balance remains the same – GDI is still the industrial-military complex faction, dominating by means of brute force. The Brotherhood of Nod's guerilla hit-and-run dynamic is far better suited to stealth and cunning, while the 'alien' third faction sits somewhere in between. They certainly wield the technical means to challenge GDI's dominance, but as 'visitors' to this world, they're also slightly wary. Weightings feel slightly precarious – it would seem that a good defence compensates only very little for a good offence, though the unstoppable march to combat certainly builds the tension. Unit creation and selection becomes second nature after only a few minutes, perhaps an indication of how much influence the original *Command And Conquer* had over subsequent RTS controls. Buildings and landmarks now offer interactive functionality – they can either be commandeered for the protection of units, or claimed as bases from which to launch attacks.

Multiplayer matches are geared towards the quickest possible resolution, an average game lasting around 15 to 20 minutes (at the preview demonstration, associate producer **Jim Vassella** was keen to push the speed of play: "It's designed so you can play a whole match on your lunch break," he said. "Or before you go to bed"). Despite this preference, all the elements are still there to allow for protracted play: there's no reason why you can't build and build until something gives; until opponent forces appear overhead and attempt to pick off your faction's defences. But as the RTS landscape becomes ever more tactically complex (and the length of battle increases as a result) this kind of arcade/strategy hybrid still appeals. The fast and furious pace is replicated in the singleplayer campaign, and charting your way across this dystopian world obviously requires much greater tactical consideration.

EA LA is determined to make the most of the game's Vista and Live support, promising to present the RTS "as a sport" and hoping to provide support for live commentary and an online tournament league. Of the 360 version, the developers maintain that control is just as intuitive on the Xbox controller as with PC peripherals – a claim only playable review code will be able to confirm.

As it stands, this game looks to be one for the old guard – next-gen in visual terms only, cosily familiar in all other respects. This needn't be a weakness; the entire basis of the series remains tried and tested and its success won't depend upon those thirsty for cutting-edge gaming experiences. *Command And Conquer 3* is no RTS revolution, but then again, who wants it to be?



C&C FMV

Rather pleasingly, CG cut-scenes are still intermingled with live-action inserts. Sure, these can feel slightly cheap and cheesy, but their presence fuels nostalgia for games past while deftly avoiding the need to lip-sync to badly acted sound files. Watching live actors perform reminds you of the period 15 years ago when it seemed as though LaserDisc gaming was the future. It'll be interesting to see whether the integration of this type of footage starts to make a comeback now that the contrast with in-engine footage is so much less jarring. Here, CG scenes seem to be reserved for when the real footage runs into budgetary concerns – special effects, for example – but the mixture of both looks convincing enough not to disrupt the actual gaming experience.





Making Tiberium is central to the lore of the *Command And Conquer* universe. It's a successful attempt to re-establish some concepts that many sequels and expansions consciously decided to veer away from







The new Dervish (left) and Paragon (right) classes are genuinely fresh ideas, the first relying on stacking and then spending enchantments to inflict rapid damage, and the latter forming the lynchpin of a team, providing support as well as damage

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **ARENANET**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

Guild Wars: Nightfall

World Of WarCraft's success has left many publishers rushing to make their own MMO. But are they looking to copy the wrong idea?

Eighteen months on, and rapidly approaching three million players, *Guild Wars* is a puzzle. *Nightfall*, the third, self-contained instalment of the free-to-play MMO fantasy combat game, does nothing to solve the contradictions.

What it does prove is that NCSoft's model of subscription-free online gaming, funded by frequent, full-price but free-standing updates, is thoroughly viable, as long as it's linked to a game which captures players' imaginations. But what it doesn't quite explain is why it's this game that has. Its financial model should mean it's a game with massive mainstream potential, but its combat systems – sophisticated but convoluted – and its emphasis on team-based PvP (diluted somewhat by *Nightfall*'s introduction of singleplayer Hero-vs-Hero battles), is bound to limit its appeal to casual players. Visually, its fantastical landscapes and statuesque characters remain weirdly sterile. The Map Travel system – which allows you to warp from point to point – is still a much-appreciated short-cut, but disconnects you from the world, and the lack of substantial customisation options, which have proven so popular in other games, still seems an odd design choice.

But that, of course, is the point. New *Guild Wars* packs aren't intended to change the core experience, only to extend the lifespan (and the cash-flow) of a proven success. And so *Nightfall* delivers two new classes – the Dervish, with fast scythe attacks and magical area-effect damage, and Paragons, whose abilities with a spear allow them to rely on ranged attacks as they issue chants and shouts which buff the rest of their party – as well as new areas, missions, skills and items. These new classes aren't just a cosmetic change: *Guild Wars*' dual-class system means their arrival substantially alters the range of character types on offer, and their abilities – particularly those of the Paragon – substantially shift the balance of PvP battles. The new Hero system puts more emphasis on solo play, giving players more control over some of their previously automated henchmen.

The shift towards more solo-friendly play is an interesting development for the series; presumably reflecting feedback on how it's often played. But while it's a worthy attempt to respond to the game's audience, there's no disguising the fact that *Guild Wars* is at its most lacklustre when it's competing with the classical RPG experience, and only truly comes alive – as it was always designed to – in skilled PvP.

Exacerbating that problem is the fact that, for all that *Nightfall* wasn't supposed to substantially evolve the game, those 18 months since the original's release have seen standards move ahead at an aggressive pace. The engine now looks a little weary, and even loyal players may be beginning to tire of the aesthetics. But for all its flaws, the proven, sustainable success of *Guild Wars* as a whole is an enormously valuable model for the future of online RPGs.

Other legacies from early *Guild Wars* instalments are the overwrought plot, cheesy cutscenes and bad voice-acting









The interface is the aspect of *Guild Wars* which has aged the least gracefully: hardly a masterpiece of form or function at launch, it now looks decidedly tired and can still be a frustration in densely-populated environments





Some of the Infected run and jump, others amble and explode; between them they test both the wits and limited ammunition of the Survivors, each of which has their own mode of defence

Left 4 Dead

The minds behind the minds of Counter-Strike think up something new: PC's inaugural night of the living deathmatch

Once you could rely on there being just the one Valve – the company that willingly incurred the wrath of the PC community to honour its done-when-it's-done philosophy and produced as a result the last **Edge** 10.

But as exciting as it remains to see that two-tone insignia heading up the announcement of a new game – not least one in which the prime goal is to massacre zombies with your friends – it pays to be careful now that the outfit has become an umbrella. After collaborations such as Ritual's *Sin Episodes: Emergence* and Arkane's *Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic*, two games that evidently tried their hardest but failed to raise the bar, the first question to ask of *Left 4 Dead* is how much this is Valve's game and how much is collaborator Turtle Rock's.

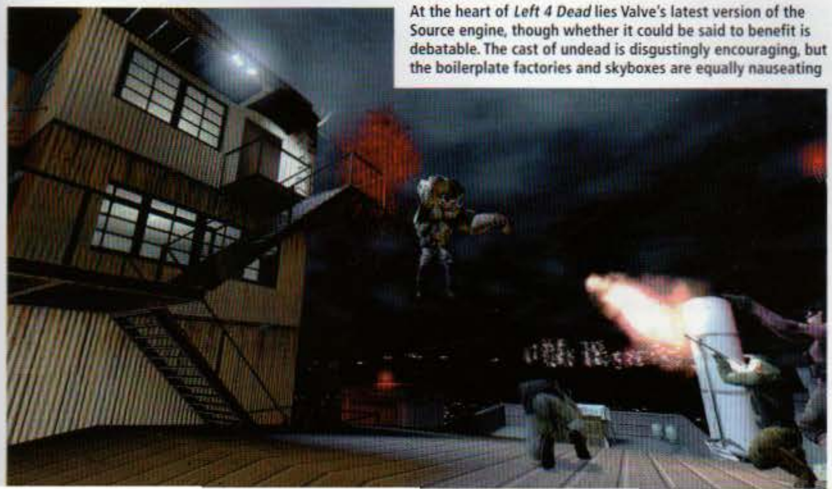
Fans of *Counter-Strike* will already have a good idea, Michael Booth's indie studio having become synonymous with *Half-Life*'s multiplayer stablemate, its responsibilities having evolved from steering home troubled project *Condition Zero* to essentially taking ownership of the series and its recent Source instalment. Though *Left 4 Dead*'s original design is said to have come to Valve as Turtle Rock's proposition, subsequent development seems to have adopted a logical collaborative spirit, Turtle Rock handling AI routines and a lion's share of the surrounding design.

Despite coasting in behind wave upon lumbering wave of genre titles, *Left 4 Dead* is quite unique. With a named cast of heavily characterised Infected – the team readily acknowledges its debt to Danny Boyle's 28 Days Later – here is a PC co-op shooter with traits of console survival horror. It might, in fact, offer the best of both worlds, games starting and finishing with server-based promptness yet finding the time to turn to Hollywood and wink.

Members of the four-man Survivors team can appropriately be pulled from underneath heaving piles of ravening zombies by their teammates, while players who join the ranks of the Infected have sufficient mobility to sneak around their opponents' mouse-fast defences and overwhelm. Expect the intimate co-op play of the human quartet, which Turtle Rock realises is something almost exclusive to console gaming, to spark off that of the zombie horde, suited as it is to more traditional class-based tactics.

Granted, there's barely room to move in a genre as tightly packed with bodies as the PC deathmatch, but it's good to see that someone is widening the arena.





At the heart of *Left 4 Dead* lies Valve's latest version of the Source engine, though whether it could be said to benefit is debatable. The cast of undead is disgustingly encouraging, but the boilerplate factories and skyboxes are equally nauseating





Don't let the Tom Savini-worthy attention to the gory details fool you, this still has all the militaristic simplicity of a PC deathmatch. Survivors and Infected are the teams, Stalkers and Boomers among the different classes

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE/TURTLE ROCK**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2007**



House of brains

Few would doubt the pedigree of the company that taught *Counter-Strike*'s bots how to think, but the demands of *Left 4 Dead*'s competing armies – one alive with survival instinct, the other dead and vast in number – must be huge. With matches lasting up to an hour, the evolution of zombie movement and spawn patterns is of key importance, Turtle Rock enlisting the services of an AI director system to better co-ordinate both the action and its individual acts of zombie cunning. The extent of player influence over the Infected has yet to be revealed, but again the procedural challenge involved in so much realtime cause and effect is enough to fray the nerves.





FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **REEF ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**

Free Running

A hop, skip and jump to Rebellion yields unexpected benefits



Word is that an Asura-powered sequel is underway. The potential for free-roaming 360 and PS3 versions is huge

When *Free Running* was initially due for release in 2005, the athletic discipline of parkour was still known for little more than Rush Hour, a 90-second TV spot commissioned by the BBC. Star David Belle's mesmerising turn in Banlieue 13 had yet to jump the Channel (or the Atlantic), and breakthrough documentary Jump London had become better known for its ode to the nation's capital than its athletic spectacle. Rebellion's Derby studio, then Core Design, couldn't have known how lucky it was. Rescheduled for early 2007, this intriguing blend of *Tony Hawk* and *The Sands Of Time* is suddenly a hot property; as viewers of Casino Royale recently discovered.

Time, then, for some clarification: *Free Running* is not actually a parkour game, and neither are its muscle-bound athletes, modelled as they are on real-life personalities, traceurs (practitioners of parkour). That would rank them alongside *Assassin's Creed*'s Altair and *The Sands Of Time*'s Prince, both of whom excel in getting from one point to another with the utmost efficiency. Instead, *Free Running* is the domain of so-called yamakasis – similarly agile individuals who swap efficiency for style. Though some of the game's objectives include point-to-point races and time trials, most favour fluent chains of acrobatic combos for which the springboard is invariably the environment.

Free of skates, bikes and all other barriers separating feet and floor, *Free Running* creates an unfamiliar bond between player and world, yet retains also a mechanical connection with other alternative sports. Scores can't be built without momentum or consistency, just as somersaults and vaults can't be chained without that precisely timed link – in *THPS* a revert, here the forward roll that turns a landing into an unbroken stride. Switching between such basic techniques and the game's trigger-modified freestyle moves is an initial headache, but there's no reason to suspect the learning curve to be any steeper than those upon which it's based. *Free Running* is an exciting prospect, for sure, even if the limitations of PS2/PSP development, together with its age, ultimately catch up with it.



While not quite rising to the anything-over-two-inches challenge of *Assassin's Creed*, the air conditioning units, crossbeams, scaffolds and doorframes of this world are enticingly replete with combo opportunities and gaps

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion: Knights Of The Nine

After some discontent over disc content for 360 owners, a piece of DLC featuring some TLC

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA (PC) MICROSOFT (360)**
DEVELOPER: **BETHEDSA**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

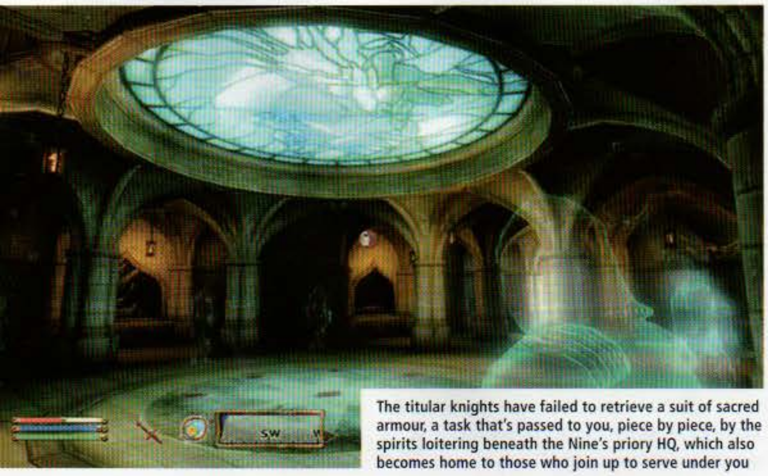
With the release of its first piece of downloadable content for *Oblivion* – and also one of the first for 360 – Bethesda didn't so much get its fingers burned as bitten off at the knuckle. Horse Armour, an incredibly slight offering for half the price of *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, was an acid-bath baptism that's subsequently led to a stream of decent download offerings, with a much savvier balance of price and function. And now, with *Knights Of The Nine*, it feels like Bethesda has settled into a comfortable enough DLC groove for it to produce something that costs twice the price of *Geometry Wars*, but should succeed in raising flagging fan interest rather than any hackles.

More a complete chapter than a lunchbox portion of small quests or supplementary items, *Knights Of The Nine* features new places, equipment, characters, a new enemy (the Aurorans) and a faction to nurture and lead, along with the expected fetch-quests and familiar dungeon crawls. The latter are accompanied by just enough puzzles and new assets to raise it above such a description, at least in comparison with too many of the quests that appear in *Oblivion* proper. And, for anyone who threw themselves encyclopaedia-deep into the game, there's a trump card: the story revolves around *Oblivion*'s chapels, and the gods that centre on each, a grandiose piece of plotting that elevates it beyond the sideline status often expected of an expansion pack.

Crowning off a year of drip-feed support that's perhaps only been matched by certain firstparty productions – *Kameo* plus, to a lesser extent, *PGR3* – and despite getting off on the wrong hoof with 360 owners, *Knights Of The Nine* feels perfectly timed and amply fleshed, while reinforcing the horrendous weight of possibilities open to Bethesda as it fills in some of the gaps in its cavernous world.



Brief but much appreciated set-pieces punctuate the several hours of questing, including a vision staged in the clouds above the Imperial City, visible between your character's feet, or a hidden subterranean grove (above) where former enemies become tame onlookers



The titular knights have failed to retrieve a suit of sacred armour, a task that's passed to you, piece by piece, by the spirits loitering beneath the Nine's priory HQ, which also becomes home to those who join up to serve under you



With space travel available as well as planetary exploration and the potentially endless possibilities of evolving your monsters, *Spectrobes* seems likely to be one of the deepeest and most varied games for the DS





Spectrobes

Disney breaks fresh ground with an archaeologically inclined collect-'em-up – but will Pokéfans dig it?

In October, Buena Vista Games announced its surprising purchase of Brighton's Climax Racing studios. While the fruits of that union are still some way off on the horizon, this month brings with it another indicator that Disney's interactive entertainment division is starting, at last, to take the videogames market seriously. *Spectrobes*, an action-RPG developed by Kyoto-based Jupiter Corp, creator of the *Picross* series, is the publisher's first step away from work based solely on existing Disney licences, and its first foray into original IP.

But the question of licences is a tangled one, and **Thierry Braille**, managing director of Buena Vista Games Europe, makes it clear that *Spectrobes* is first and foremost a means of creating "new Disney characters for a brand new audience". While cross-platform plans have yet to be confirmed, a children's cartoon series has been strongly hinted at as a starting point.

If you were feeling cynical, you might find the 'original IP' part misleading too, since the game revolves around collecting, evolving and battling the eponymous monsters across a series of different environments. Similarities to *Pokémon* are hard to ignore, but there's plenty to suggest that *Spectrobes* is shaping up to be a confident time sink in its own right, with enough new ideas to keep things feeling fresh.

And the development team seems to be getting many of those new ideas right. Spectrobes are found in a fossilised state, and before being sent into battle they must first be dug up and then resurrected. Excavation using the stylus is a genuinely nerve-wracking experience: too much pressure will destroy the fossil, and selecting the right drill head to work with is a tricky business. Resurrection is taken care of by shouting: a gimmicky idea on paper, but getting the pitch and volume within the specific parameters required for each different species turns out to be an exacting and entertaining task in reality.

There are still potential pitfalls, though. The levels revealed so far seem slightly empty, controlling the Spectrobes in realtime battles often feels haphazard, and the vital sense of connection as claw meets flesh is lacking. Visuals, while technically some of the most solid 3D yet seen on both screens of the DS, can also miss the evocative primitivism of *Pokémon*, and the sci-fi universe-in-peril plot is heavy-handed when compared to the other game's aimless bucolic wandering.

But it's the most important factor for any collect-'em-up – that is, the monsters themselves – which is still hard to judge at the moment. Some of the limited range of species we've seen so far are captivatingly strange, yet others seem over-engineered and messy. So even if all it takes to resurrect a Spectrobe is a lot of practice and a slightly sore throat, Buena Vista and Jupiter may find that the act of awakening the obsessive completist that lurks within every gamer is far trickier.



The Spectrobes themselves are varied and interesting, if occasionally over-detailed. Their designs have been influenced not just by anime and manga, but traditional Japanese art as well. Producer Kentaro Hisai admits that many of his best monster concepts come to him at inappropriate moments, such as the middle of the night



The Spectrobes are controlled in battle via the DS's shoulder buttons. Timing is the crucial concern when in a fight, as your monsters will need a break to recharge themselves between attacks. In a much-appreciated concession to western tastes, the battles do not occur randomly, instead appearing on the map in the form of purple whirlwinds that, if you want to, are easy to avoid

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **JUPITER CORP**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH**



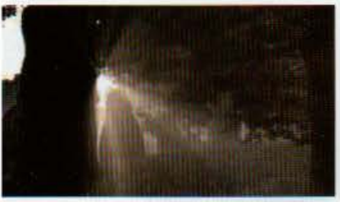
Gotta watch 'em all

As a means of introducing people to the world of *Spectrobes*, Buena Vista Games is releasing a series of six online cartoons, available for download at www.spectrobes.com. Filling in the backstory, the short films may also provide a clue to exactly what we can expect from the inevitable series. With their slightly sanitised manga styling, they're an indicator of Disney's attempt to mix fantasy and sci-fi – and east and west – without alienating either audience.

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **10TACLE STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **10TACLE STUDIOS SLOVAKIA**
ORIGIN: **SLOVAKIA**
RELEASE: **2007**

Elveon

Elves are immortal, but for how long will 10tacle's action RPG endure?







Besides from the non-humanoid characters, such as the wild animals, the gameplay will revolve exclusively around the Elvish race, who take a rather more nightmarish form than Legolas'

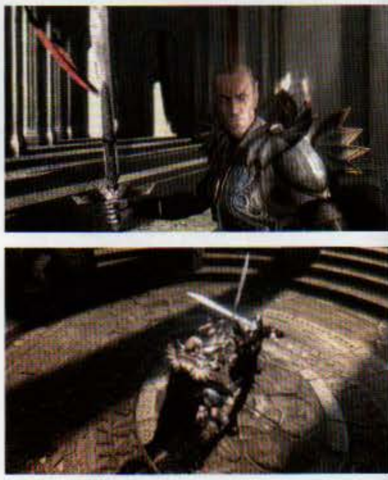
Seeing *Elveon*'s art direction immediately sets off a severe case of déjà vu – you might remember the likes of its fantastical environments from a certain multiple Oscar-winning trilogy. To be fair, *Elveon* is grounded in the same kind of mythological setting. Nevertheless, the level of brazen filching on display is slightly unettling – perhaps its time to leave the inspirations of the cinema behind to allow interactive media to blaze its own trail across the popular psyche.

Obvious motivations aside, other elements of *Elveon* show promise. Overall, the game is visually impressive – the geography is vast and expansive, enlivened by well-implemented volumetric lighting. Forest scenes are particularly atmospheric, being both organic and believable thanks to trees that actually look like trees – gnarled, austere and refreshingly three-dimensional. *Onimusha*-style elemental weaponry is also available, augmented in an interface that seems to offer intuitive support.

Where the game currently flounders is with the leaden movement of its characters. *Elveon* is primarily an RPG, but its publishers are keen to stress that it's 'an action RPG – with the heaviest emphasis on action'. What results is a realtime fighting system which may aim to unlock *Devil May Cry*'s potential, but seems executed in slow motion. Without the ability to jump, characters feel rooted to the spot and there seems little hope for the kind of fluid improvisation on which action games depend.

There's still some months of development to come, and time for the action to evolve. If it does, then *Elveon* has the potential to matter far more than its imitative origins suggest.





The combat around which the game is based is mainly of the swords and sorcery kind – fights like this are currently vicious enough to satisfy the appetite. When we saw the game, however, 10tacle was still debating whether or not to include blood in the battles, too

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA JAPAN**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Boku To Sim No Machi

We all have our views on the cloning of animals – EA, it seems, is all for it





Raiding the fridge is a familiar prospect for anyone who's spent any time at all with *The Sims*. It seems somewhat unlikely that starving your Sims to death will be an option in this saccharine version, though

Making headway in Japan is something EA has struggled with for some time: a brief flirtation with Squaresoft floundered when cultural differences between the companies were deemed irreconcilable. Now EA is attempting to make an impact on the Japanese market again, this time with an extremely localised version of *The Sims*. By using Japanese creators and designers to make a game attuned to local tastes, the publisher hopes to be able to reposition itself as a viable competitor to entrenched local products.

Riding on the back of the massive popular tidal wave that is *Animal Crossing*, *Boku To Sim No Machi* features similarly proportioned cutesy characters in a similarly proportioned, cheerily colour-saturated world. Exactly where this *Sims* incarnation diverges from Nintendo's connected virtual world isn't at all clear, though presumably EA's game will offer the kind of drag-and-drop customisation features that run through *The Sims* titles in the west. Otherwise, the gameplay seems very similar to *Animal Crossing*'s – characters can visit each other's territories, while there's a range of items and objects to collect and share. Wii Remote functionality will be central to building and controlling your terrain.

While it's encouraging to see EA attempting to make its mark on Japan's domestic market, the premise of *Boku To Sim No Machi* risks falling between two stones. Whenever it's released, it's likely to risk being eclipsed by a superior *Animal Crossing* Wii experience.



The extremely simple customisation interface on offer in *Boku To Sim No Machi* is rather reminiscent of the one that's already available in Nintendo's own Mii channel



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **Y'SK**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Shinjuku No Okami

Not Ameratsu's big city adventure, but a classic cop caper with unique stylings

Everything about *Shinjuku No Okami* seems tempered to abate the Japanese censoring outfit, CERO. Capcom felt its wrath after the national furore caused over releasing the subtitled *GTA* series, then again more recently when CERO inflicted domestic cuts (not to mention a forbidding Z-rating) upon *Dead Rising*. Striking a balance between violent escapism and societal acceptance is always difficult, especially when the corporate tightrope is constantly being pulled one way by gamers and another by those charged with protecting 'vulnerable' groups in the community. Perhaps for this reason, *Shinjuku No Okami* has something of a diffident air – eager to please all, and at pains not to offend any.

Cel-shading is the first concession you'll notice: the game's various characters are glossed over with a cartoon sheen, instantly disarming the player of any notion of realism. Hoping that this will allow a portrayal of violence implicitly removed from the real world, Capcom appointed developer Y'sk to oversee the project. Y'sk is well known in Japan for using the same device, mainly in its own *Kenka Bancho* series.

Then there's the story – a traditional police thriller dressed up as a free-roaming adventure – which errs on the side of conservatism. By placing a 37-year-old detective at the centre of the game, Capcom has deftly sidestepped the deep-rooted Japanese taboo of mixing themes of crime with youth. Gameplay eschews firearms for hand-to-hand combat, while a great deal of emphasis is placed on the interrogation of suspects – an interesting device that will remove vital elements of the game from Shinjuku's mean streets entirely.

Although similarities to Sega's *Yakuza* are striking, Capcom's emphasis is different enough to appeal. It will also make a refreshing change to have to uphold the law rather than break it – something of a novelty in the genre.

However much *Shinjuku No Okami* kowtows to popular prejudices, it at least seems founded on an innovative conceit, one which may well set it apart from similar offerings, if only by means of restraint.





The cartoon style of protagonists also presents something of an aesthetic paradox when considering the extremely faithful renderings of Shinjuku that make up the game's neon-plastered environments

Test Drive Unlimited

No need to wait for a next-generation console: let the next gen come to you

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **MELBOURNE HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 17**





Checking your status at home is one of the things that's had to be downgraded for the PS2 experience, reducing the 360's imbedded video to a static screen. As compromises go, it's hardly a game-breaking change

PS3 may have control of the limelight, but PS2 still has control of the living room. With more than 100 million consoles sold, and a healthy proportion still in use, there's a strong, but largely unheeded, argument for it remaining a AAA platform. *Test Drive Unlimited* shows exactly what the machine can (and can't) offer to rival the new generation and proves the point that the machine still has untapped potential. The foundations of its Oahu island remain intact, it still looks and feels like a corporate paradise, and it's still gigantic.

Recognising that the vast majority of PS2 owners have never taken their consoles online, Melbourne House has buffeted the singleplayer game with an incremental credit system, unlocking further challenges and location options as races are won and objectives completed. In conjunction with the massive streaming map this plays out very well, mimicking the network experience and providing substantially enough goals for players to want to complete. Understandably, some of the non-race elements interrupt the seamless flow of play, utterly excusable when you consider the limitations of the hardware. Exactly how the online components function won't be known until nearer release, but a quick extrapolation from the singleplayer suggests that it could provide as immersive a ride as the 360 offers.

Visually, the game has obviously been ratcheted down quite a bit, though not so that it impedes enjoyment. All in all, *TDU* looks set to join the recent PS2 titles that challenge the notion that HD is a necessity. In many respects, it's the perfect last-gen swansong: one final proof of an old machine's power, and a tantalising taster of the graphically splendid, community focused experiences that come as standard on the new machines.



The map retains its point-to-point satellite navigation system and is easy to follow. Emulating the 360's map zooming is a bit more than the PS2 can handle though



You can tell from the blocky building models that the game's on a last gen machine, although Melbourne House has done an excellent job of prioritising the detail and finish on the all-important cars



WE COULD BE HEROES

SUDA 51 LOVES NOTHING MORE THAN TO KEEP GAMERS ON THEIR TOES: NEW PROJECT NO MORE HEROES IS CERTAINLY ACHIEVING THAT

TITLE: **NO MORE HEROES**
FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SPIKE**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2007**

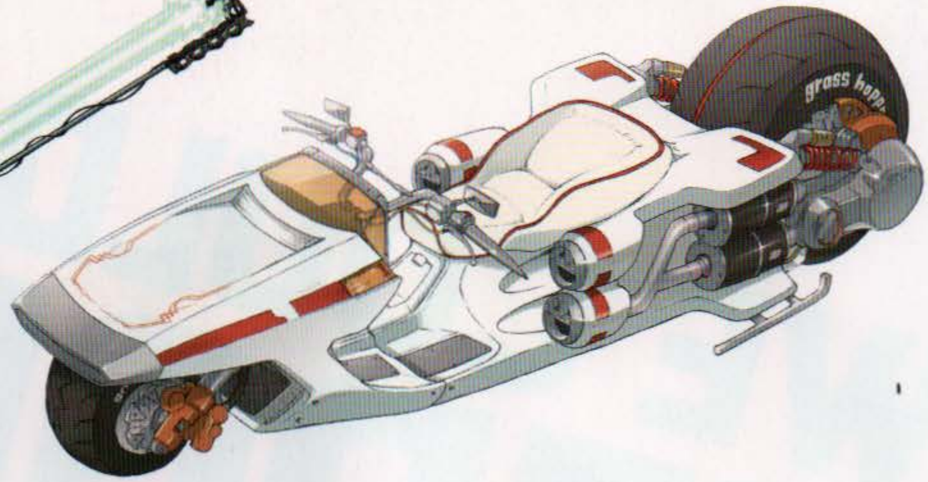
Six months ago, it seemed clear, if unfathomable, where Grasshopper was going. *Kurayami*, its darkly fantastic PS3 project revealed in **E**162, was everything you'd expect of the developer – ambitious, stylish, and impossibly risky. But almost before the excitement that greeted its debut had a chance to peak, word of another project emerged. Unveiled over the next few pages, it turns the head-turning surprises of *Kurayami* on their head yet again: from PS3 to Wii, from fairy-tale village to beach-bum suburb, from gloomy gothic to sun-bleached So-Cal. Even from a company famed for innovation, *No More Heroes* feels somewhat schizophrenic: another stylistic convulsion from a company seemingly phobic about staying still. Is that reinvention a commercial necessity?
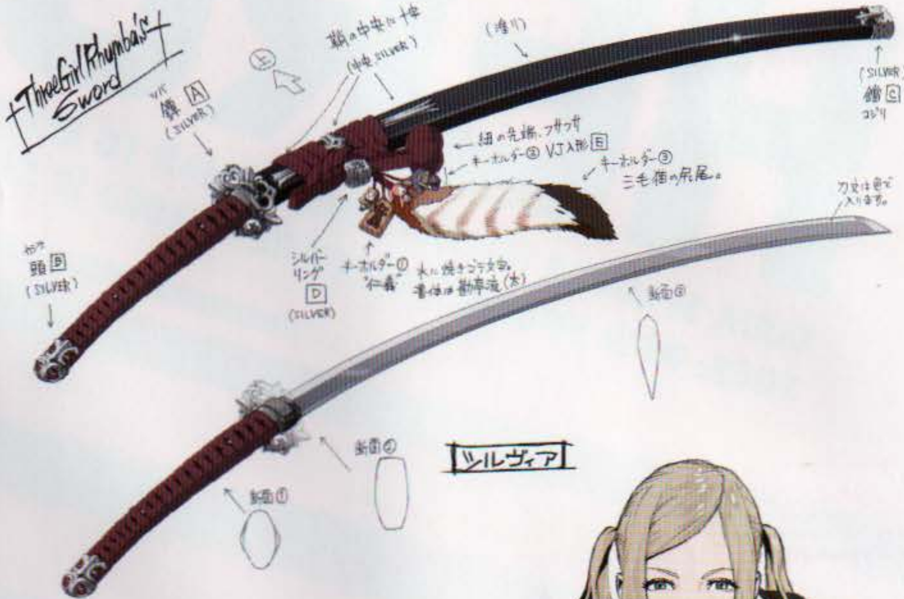
"I get the feeling that if you make a game too innovative, you'll have trouble doing business in Japan," says the game's director **Suda '51' Goichi**, wryly. Last time we spoke, he seemed genuinely surprised at the global reach of the game that made his name. These days he seems to take worldwide acceptance as a given, spurning the market of his home country for the less conservative climate of the west. "We're very conscious that we're trying to sell this game overseas," he continues. "Trying to sell this game domestically will be very hard."

Hard, perhaps, because the very foundation of the game is based on an increasingly ubiquitous western conceit: that of free roaming. After the tightly conceived environments of *Killer 7*, this may come as a bit of a shock to the Grasshopper faithful. So why this change in emphasis, why the move away from a setting that favoured pure combat to an autonomous, perpetual world? Goichi is unflinching in naming his major

トラビス







シルヴィア





Concept art appears to be drawn along more conventional lines than the sharp-edged characters of Goichi's last major game. Despite his intention to sell *No More Heroes* overseas, these anime renderings look resolutely Japanese





Travis' bike is so big that it'll be interesting to see how it handles in combination with the sensitivity of the Wii Remote. Also intriguing is how some elements jar with the west coast town. How the Japanese schoolgirl boss (below) finds herself there is anyone's guess



Whether Travis Touchdown shares any of the traits of *Killer 7*'s own Travis character isn't yet known, though given the fact that the original title for *No More Heroes* was *Number 11* we wouldn't dare rule it out





inspiration: "Rockstar is a company that's had a tremendous influence on me, in *GTA* they managed to create a city that's very much a simulation of our society. We can't match them for ambition with *No More Heroes*, so we just want to use that basic idea." It's easy to take for granted the impact sandbox gameplay has had, but in Japan, resistance to the concept still runs high. "When I first pitched the idea of a large map, people just didn't get it," he says ruefully. "Even at my own company!"

Moving about the town will require the use of the massive mechanical machine that is your motorbike steered by rotating the Wii Remote left or right depending on which way you want to go ("It's a bit like KITT in Knight Rider," Goichi smiles. "You can call it and it will respond"). We ask whether you'll be able to mow down city dwellers in the style of *GTA*. "No," is the response. "You can't crash into people and kill them. You will be able to hit them, but we haven't yet figured out whether this will be with your hand or with a weapon."

"ROCKSTAR IS A COMPANY THAT'S HAD A TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE ON ME, IN GRAND THEFT AUTO THEY MANAGED TO CREATE A CITY THAT'S A SIMULATION OF OUR OWN SOCIETY"

Set in the town of Santa Destroy, *No More Heroes* centres around the life of Travis Touchdown – an ordinary kid who just so happens to want to become a world-class assassin. We ask Goichi to talk us through what the town will feel like. "It's going to be three kilometres square," he explains. "Which isn't massive, but it's as big as we could achieve under the circumstances. Santa Destroy's really just modelled on any number of small US west coast towns, and there will be lots of people inhabiting it. This is our first attempt at creating something like this, so we're still kind of learning the process."

What about Travis himself? *Killer 7*'s characters were a confused distillation of delusion and desire, loneliness and longing, serenity and schizophrenia. So does *No More Heroes*' central protagonist have 'issues'? "He's a kind of otaku," Goichi replies. "He's a fan of many hobbies and it's through his obsession with firearms and other things that he decides to become an assassin."

The heart of this obsession is also the basis for the game. Travis feels trapped by the backwards small town mentality of Santa Destroy and vowing





So far, cinematic sequences like these display the most acute evidence of the kind of design ethos we've come to expect from Grasshopper Manufacture. Hardly anything of the actual story has been revealed so far, but the array of characters on offer signals that narrative is central



to make a name for himself in one of the mythical cities that lay outside. Thanks to his fervent interest in weapons, Travis decides that the most sensible escape route is to become the best assassin the place has to offer. Starting at the very bottom of a local hitman league, the eager youth has to fight his way through ten superior killers to gain the respect and attention of those beyond the town's confines. How does this work in play? "It's just the basic idea of a dungeon with a boss at the end. It's kind of like *Zelda* in the sense that you have a central map away from the places where you'll actually have to fight. I say 'dungeons', but they're not all enclosed spaces, some of them will be completely open environments."

Conventional weaponry doesn't hold much weight in *No More Heroes*. "You're armed with a laser sabre and on screen it looks like a scene from Star Wars," Goichi says. It's an instant reminder of the katana-wielding controls of *Red Steel*. Will you need to strike and lunge with the Remote? "Actually the controls of our game are very innovative. You'll just turn the Wii Remote in a certain direction and press the A button. Now, depending on which way you've turned it, Travis will strike a certain part of his enemy's body." Killing opponents is not so easy: each challenger has a tension gauge which you'll have to fill with well-placed hits in order to destroy them. Once the gauge is full, an on-screen prompt will tell you when you're ready to land the killing blow. Won't this become repetitive? "Most of the controls are button-led," he says. "But you'll need to use motion as well. For a start there are some minigames in the town itself, so you'll find yourself having to clean graffiti off of walls or pick up rubbish – that kind of thing. We've also tried to make combat fun by introducing a system whereby you'll have to recharge the power of your laser sabre by shaking the Remote."

"WHEN OUR GAME HITS THE SHELVES THE WII WILL HAVE AN INSTALLED USER BASE. PEOPLE PROBABLY WON'T FEEL THE NEED TO JUMP ABOUT TO ENJOY THEIR GAMES ANY MORE"

Cluttering the screen with the likes of the tension gauge looks a bit risky, but could help lend urgency to the combat



Developing for the Wii seems to present problems for thirdparty developers who haven't fully grasped the measure of its motion-sensitive subtleties yet. How has Goichi tackled this? "To be honest, I tried a lot of approaches," he answers. "At first I thought about purely using the motion sensor but I soon realised that by the time our game hits the shelves, the Wii will already have an installed user base. They probably won't feel the need to jump about or make dynamic moves to enjoy their games any more. So *No More Heroes* will try to offer a more relaxed Wii experience."

Aside from controls, is there anything else that worries Goichi about the abilities of the Wii? "Having played on both the PS3 and 360, my main concern is the visual gap between them and Nintendo's system. There's a massive difference between the graphical capabilities of *No More Heroes* and the graphics you see on the other consoles. We have to bridge that gap somehow, if







GOICHI THEFT AUTO

Everyone expects the clutch of parodic products present in every *GTA* game – indeed Rockstar is particularly well known for tapping into popular culture generally to create its own gentle sideswipes at brand-name products and services. Given the enthusiasm with which Goichi has taken up *GTA* as an benchmark, it's unsurprising that our studio visit revealed Grasshopper producing its own homage to this practice by mocking up their own version of Rockstar's iconic logo. "We respect Rockstar far more than we take inspiration from them," Goichi said. "But it is our ambition to become as big and influential as they are." It's curious that despite the belief that gaming is a global industry, such east-meets-west idolisations are rare, meaning that most game development – and most games' stylistic approach – lacks the kind of cross-pollination which Goichi has dedicated himself to. But who knows? Perhaps, after seeing the shot below, his idols might return the favour with *Rockstar Presents Suda 51 Table Tennis*.





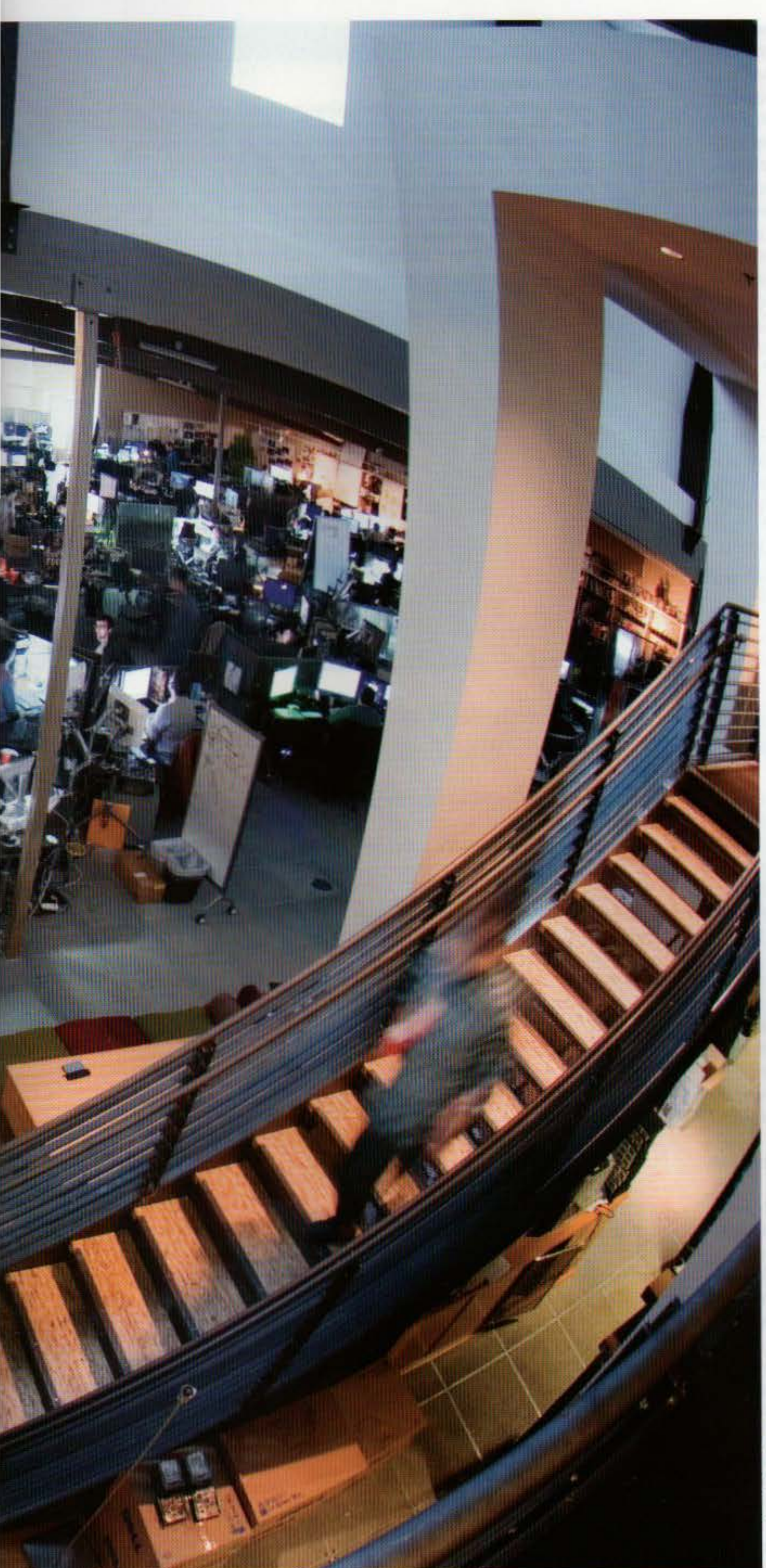
only to compete on a level playing field." Some of these graphical shortfalls can be compensated for by the striking art design and stylistics that remain in place from previous Grasshopper offerings. In this respect, Goichi has been extremely proactive – he's hired respected manga and anime artists Koza Kyusuke and Koyama Shigeto to help piece visual aspects of the game together. "It's not just their design that's important to the game," we're told. "It's their ideas." Interestingly, Goichi doesn't rule out an anime spin-off.

Whether *No More Heroes* can live up to the form set by its predecessor hangs in the balance. It's certainly ambitious enough, but limitations in understanding its intended audience combined with the need to make the most out of its supporting hardware could still undermine its success. Ultimately, its biggest gambit might lie in trying to sell a convincing America back to Americans, especially considering its director's own admission that "dealing with foreign companies is difficult because of the language barrier." Looking at the early screenshots presented here may initially set off alarm bells, portraying the kind of settings and scenarios you'd expect to see in many steadfastly conventional titles. But with Goichi at the helm it's almost impossibly hard to judge. While there's no doubt that everything he says about the game is true, but it's eminently conceivable that it's only half the story, that the other half is something reserved for the experience of actually playing through it. *Killer 7* was a game particularly vulnerable to narrative spoilers: your enjoyment came from unfolding the disparate story elements just as much as the exhilaratingly bizarre combat. There's every chance that *No More Heroes* will play out the same way: dazzlingly offbeat and more than just a little demented.



Spending time with Goichi is always entertaining; he's hardly a shrinking violet. In an increasingly corporate development climate, it's refreshing to meet someone unafraid to let their own personality override the usual business-like approach





Photography: Charles Peterson

This Spartan Life

Does it take military discipline or gamer enthusiasm to make an Edge 10? We talk to Bungie's finest about working inside Microsoft and playing beyond Halo

Yeah, sometimes it feels like I'm still the new guy," says Bungie's **Jaime Griesemer**, drumming restlessly on the conference-room table. "Like, sometimes I feel like I can just say whatever I want because they'll just ignore me, because I'm the new guy."

Griesemer has been at the firebrand US studio since 1999. Only ten others have been there longer.

It makes no sense, because to all intents and purposes, the curly-haired, fidgety, scattershot design lead *is* Bungie. He's hardly a founder member, having arrived less than a year before the Chicago independent was acquired by Microsoft to develop *Halo* as an Xbox launch title in 2000. And he can't be singled out as the outstanding talent in this outstandingly talented team, although he's tasked with preserving the precious core of the *Halo* experience – the infamous '30 seconds of fun' that he labelled and helped to create, that freeform, looping interplay between the weapons, vehicles and shields.

He is, though, the archetypal Bungie employee: simultaneously irreverent and passionately loyal; fiercely self-critical; full of excitement at the company's achievements, no matter how obscure; recruited from its devoted fanbase (in his case, the clans formed around *Myth*). And he has a topsy-turvy understanding of studio hierarchy, where operational chains of command are counter-balanced by meritocracy, by a ranking system based on length of tenure (from Grizzled Ancient to Newbie) and by persistent competition amongst staff to prove just how Bungie they can be.

"It's impossible to feel stable and entrenched here," Griesemer continues. "The newest designer will be sitting in a design meeting and challenge me on something that's been an established part of the *Halo* gameplay for years and years and years. I like having those discussions, sitting in a room and having a bunch of people just go at me. For me it's really fun if your ego can survive it, and the ideas that come out of the other side are vastly improved."

Within these walls, Griesemer can say anything, and anything can be said to him. That's one unusual thing about Bungie; one clue to the mysteries we're here, at the studio's Seattle offices, to unravel. How, exactly, do you go about making a 10/10 game? And perhaps even more crucially – how do you hold your studio together when that game balloons into a cross-media entertainment phenomenon, when you become a strategic asset in a consumer electronics war, when your self-contained world is transformed overnight into a drop in the ocean of the world's richest company? In the face of all that, how does Bungie stay Bungie?

Building your own private fortress certainly can't hurt. After completing *Halo* and *Halo 2* on Microsoft's Millennium Campus in nearby Redmond, Bungie was the first part of Microsoft Game Studios (discounting UK-based Rare) to be allowed to break away and establish its own base of operations.

The building is a discreet, low-slung, converted warehouse store on a quiet retail park, neighboured by pancake houses and coffee shops. But step inside the huge main office space and the dark is studded with the bluish highlights of a hundred LCD panels; with two storeys of solid, free-standing closed offices at the back, it's like nothing so much as stepping right inside a *Halo* structure. Hardly surprising, since one of the trained architects on Bungie's art team contributed to the design.

The move wasn't just about privacy, though. "It was to get a space that was open, that felt comfortable to be in, that worked with our collaborative nature, allowing us more flexibility," says studio manager **Harold Ryan**, a stout, impenetrable wall of Microsoft-trained muscle who is Bungie's operational chief. "Initially I thought it was a funny joke when someone suggested we put the desks on wheels. And now, the desks are on wheels. You want to do a desk move, you just unplug from your floor box and plug back in." The desks are arranged in circles around rough disciplines, employees' physical locations shifting with their working relationships.

Art director **Marcus Lehto**, soft-spoken giant and veteran of the Chicago days, says free speech and inter-disciplinary freedom have always been vital to Bungie's creative health. "From the very beginning when it was just three or four of us sitting in an old Catholic Girls' School with mice coming out of the desks, to this, it's been about keeping that open communication and the structure of disciplines – we don't ever break engineering apart as a completely separate entity from art, from design." He recalls the temporary offices Bungie occupied immediately after the Microsoft acquisition: "They put us in ten-foot-high cubicles. While we were all within the same vicinity, our team started to break down within just a matter of weeks. It was amazing how much we relied on line of sight, being able to talk immediately, not having to communicate through email."

The flexible approach is about to become very important, because Bungie is looking to expand. The studio, currently standing at just over 100-strong including contractors, has just completed its biggest hiring year ever and intends to keep growing fast, partly to sate 360's tremendous hunger for assets. Partly, but not entirely. With likely less than a year of *Halo 3* development left, and the end of this monumental trilogy (though not necessarily of Bungie *Halo* games – Ryan at one point refers to "the next *Halo* game" and says it will likely be a shooter) in sight, the germination of new, original projects is already underway. Bungie is about to undergo its biggest change yet, bigger even perhaps than the Microsoft 'merger' (as Greisemer insists on calling it): the move beyond being a single-project, single-IP studio.

The motivations are manifold, not least the conflict between an unwillingness to let go of *Halo*, and a need to escape it. **Marty O'Donnell**, Bungie's composer, audio director, 'ombudsman' and avuncular father figure – a former contractor in his 50s who has gradually become the social lynchpin of the organisation – puts his finger on it: "To some extent we have let *Halo* equal Bungie, Bungie equal *Halo*. Over the last four or five years I think we've got slightly complacent about our personal Bungie branding, we've become so equated with *Halo*, and as Microsoft rightfully decides to expand the *Halo* universe and have other people making it, we're like, oh… right."

"See that doesn't faze Marty or me that much," notes technical lead **Chris Butcher**, an energetic, sharp New Zealander and reputed 'boy genius' who joined from the fan community at about the same time as Greisemer. "But you've got to remember that 75 per cent of the people out there have only worked on *Halo* games. And more to the point, since they've arrived at Bungie, the only games they've worked on have been five-million-unit selling, platform-shipping blockbusters. That's a very different world to be in than working on some other game that we might do next, so there's going to be a real challenge for us to separate ourselves."

Bungie is naturally never one to shy from such a challenge. And while it's true that more projects need a bigger Bungie, it's also true, reckons Lehto, than a bigger Bungie needs more projects. "To retain that culture, it's going to be necessary for us to allow the team to break off into smaller teams where they are able to all have an impact on the project. As you grow to that 100-person-plus studio you can't have everybody having an impact on one project in some profound way."

Even if Bungie wasn't considering expanding its portfolio, though – even if it was happy to commit itself to remaining a *Halo* factory for the foreseeable future – the landscape

Community care

A vital tool in maintaining Bungie's identity within Microsoft, and retaining its community of fans, has been its website bungie.net. It's also an example of the way Bungie has been changing Microsoft from within. "When I first started four years ago we were viewed as being in direct conflict with the xbox.coms of the world and the overall PR plans for Microsoft, and we had a lot of pain points." But now "Brian [Jarrad] specifically is seen as the role-model for community management within Microsoft," says O'Connor, and bungie.net is widely imitated. Bungie.net's stat-tracking *Halo 2* integration was also a labour of love for the team – "one of the best experiences I ever had as an employee," says Russell – and an example of the side projects that Barnes says "would be defined at other companies as wish-list items, which are at the core of doing cool things for people who play the games".

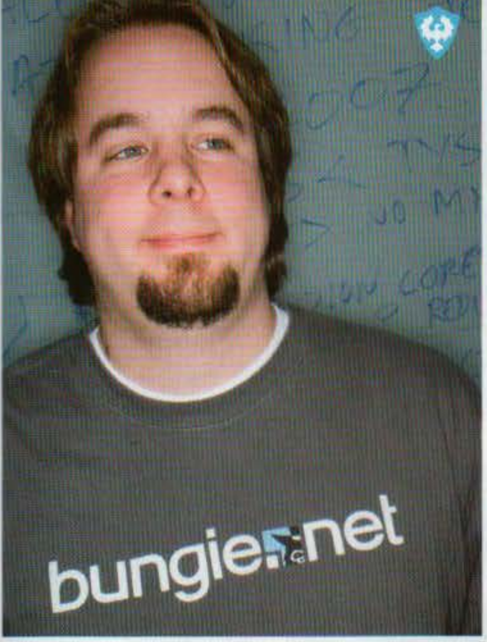
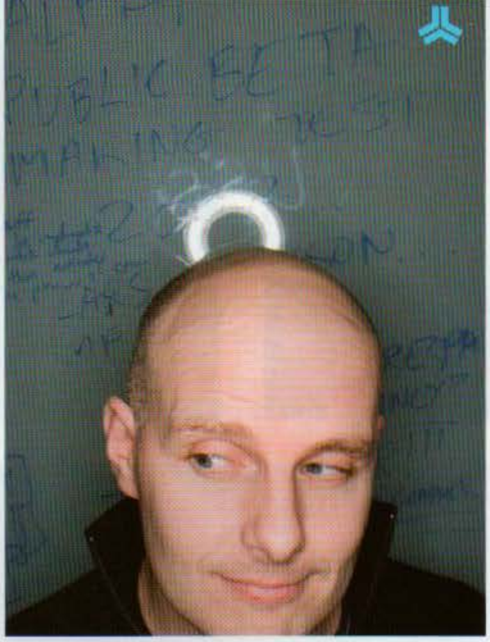


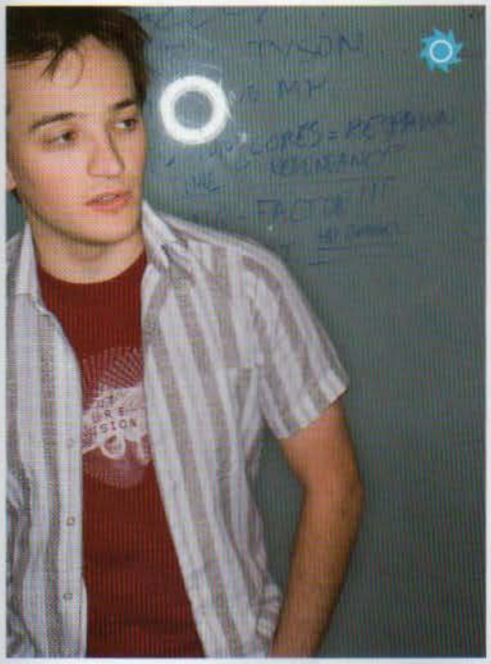
"To some extent, we have let **Halo equal Bungie** and Bungie equal Halo. Over the last **four or five years** I think we've got **slightly complacent**"

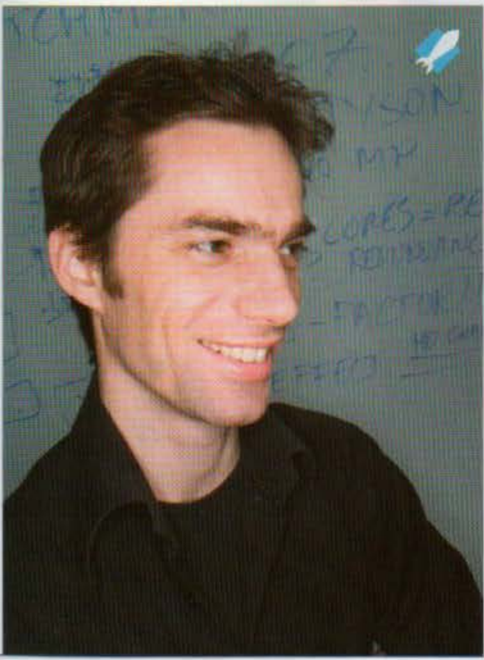


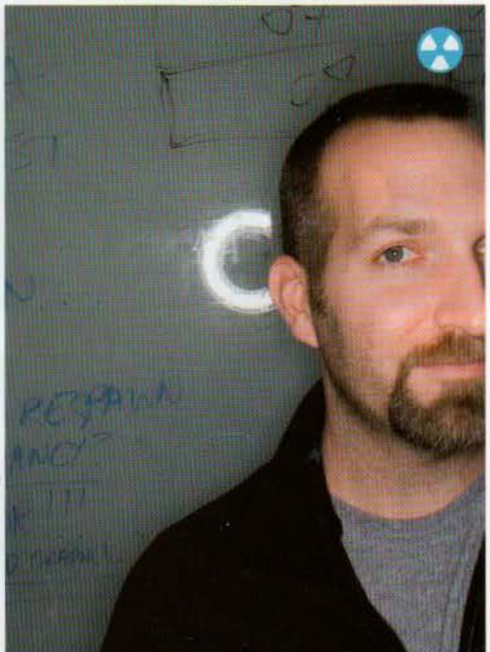


Brian Jarrard, community and franchise Lead
Frank O'Connor, writer and community
Marty O'Donnell, audio director
Chris Butcher, technical lead
Harold Ryan, studio manager
Jaime Greisemer, sandbox design lead
Jonty Barnes, head of production
Zach Russell, director of special projects
Marcus Lehto, art director


bungie.net


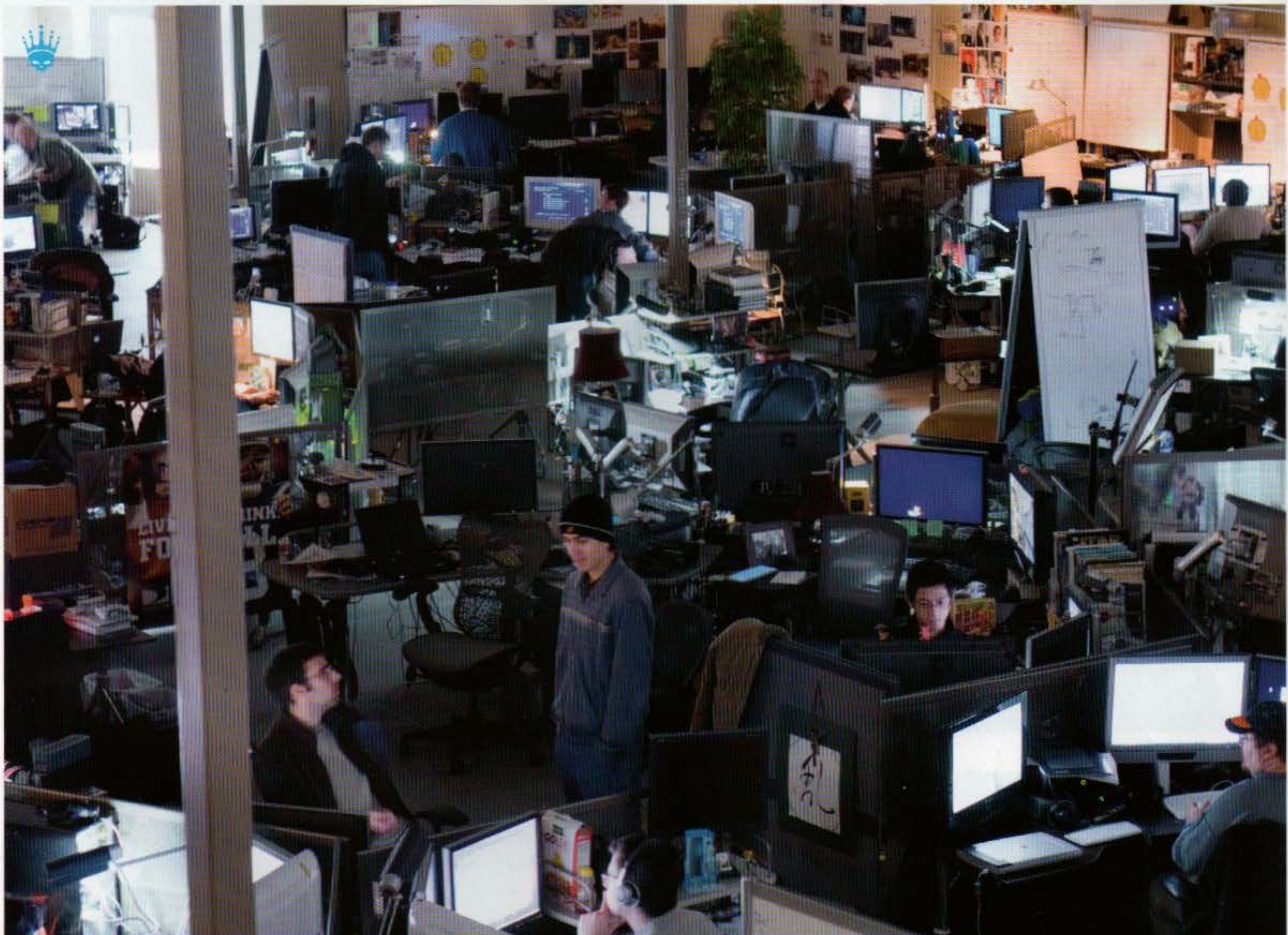




















[Facing page] Whiteboards are everywhere – the marker is mightier than the email. [Bottom left] *Street Fighter* is a company obsession and there are two cabinets in the building

would look very different now than it did five years ago. Xbox 360 will be two years old by the time *Halo 3* comes out, and the tight synergy between Bungie's games and Microsoft's consoles has, to some extent, already been broken.

"The concept that Bungie wouldn't have a launch title for the Xbox 360 was almost impossible to conceive of," says O'Donnell. "That was really hard for the suits to swallow, it was like, no no no, we have to have a Bungie launch title. But I remember saying that there's nothing better than for Bungie not to be able to have a launch title, and for Bungie not to be defining the Xbox 360. I know it's scary for everybody, but it's not scary for us. We make games. We don't ship platforms. We don't push platforms. As soon as we think that that's what we're about, as soon as we think that Bungie's a platform company, we are, in my opinion, doomed." Butcher is firm in his agreement. "Even through the Microsoft acquisition, Bungie's purpose is not to make money for Microsoft and support the platform. Bungie's purpose is to make great stuff."

The surprise, perhaps, is Microsoft's willingness to see it that way, and to allow Bungie to continue to exist on its own terms. "When we first moved here from Chicago I thought it was going to be the doom of Bungie altogether," confesses Lehto, "that it was only a matter of time before either we were converted to processes that we truly didn't believe in and that would destroy our culture." He's happy to have been proved wrong. Head of production **Jonty Barnes**, a slender Englishman very recently arrived from new stablemates Lionhead, was stunned. "Actually, it's very much like a publisher-developer relationship. Lionhead and Bungie are equally intermixed with Microsoft, and that's quite incredible considering the geographic locations."

"Being someone who had my own business I knew that it would be a culture shock for Alex [Seropian, Bungie founder] to suddenly become a middle manager at a corporation the size of Microsoft," says O'Donnell. "I knew that Alex would probably get frustrated with it and within the next few years he did. But when we talked to Ed Fries [Microsoft's VP of games publishing at the time], that was one of the things that he absolutely assured us was not going to happen. They wanted to do everything they could to keep Bungie insulated, let it have its own culture, and not have it be too watered down."

"That was a real departure for Microsoft at the time," adds Butcher.

"Microsoft wanted to do **everything they could to keep** Bungie insulated, let it **have its own culture, and not** have it be watered down"

Comic relief

The most high-profile element of *Halo*'s expansion beyond Bungie's walls has been put on hold for now: the film adaptation, to be produced by Peter Jackson and directed by Neill Blomkamp, fell foul of budgetary disagreements with backers Universal and Fox. "Better for it to die now than be bastardised over the course of development because it all becomes about money," says Jarrard phlegmatically. "The creative spirit of the movie started to be joepardised by balance sheets and contracts." However, that leaves two more Xbox 360 projects: *Halo Wars*, the RTS by genre specialists and Microsoft Games Studios stablemates Ensemble, and a yet-to-be-defined project by Jackson's fledgling Wingnut Interactive. An indication of how seriously Bungie takes its custodianship of the *Halo* universe can be drawn from its loving incubation of the recent Halo Graphic Novel (below), which it edited and financed itself before turning to Marvel as a publisher. "After not ever really getting anywhere with the traditional franchise licensing model and pursuing finding a partner it just wasn't really going the way we wanted it to," says Jarrard. "One day, Lorraine [McLees], one of our art leads, just decided we should do this book ourselves." Bungie was able to approach the artists it wanted, including French legend Jean 'Moebius' Giraud and 2000AD stalwart Simon Bisley, free of the political encumbrances suffered by Marvel and DC. "It had the side effect of being a really cool morale boost for our team to see their universe, their characters, realised by people that we idolise in the comic industry."



It still hasn't been plain sailing. "It's not necessarily a fight against forces at Microsoft that want to change things," Butcher continues, "but just the natural way things work at a large company. Microsoft has always been organised around the competition of ideas rather than the competition of groups."

"Especially it has to do with, not so much the people at the top, but some of the people out to the sides, people who think: aren't you guys just part of Microsoft?" says O'Donnell, his frustration starting to show. "'Why can't we do the same thing we do with everybody else?' It's not so much a fight, it's just that it's important for us to keep those barriers out there… I don't know, it actually is somewhat of a fight. Not everybody has the big picture, especially at a lower level." It's a fight that only "five people at the studio, tops," are ever fighting, according to Butcher. "The Bungie management team does a really good job of shielding us from these pressures," adds community and franchise lead **Brian Jarrad**.

The question remains: why take the fight on in the first place? Why put the 'Bungie culture' so precious to this team – "a slightly irreverent attitude, and not corporate, bureaucratic, business-focused kind of people," according to O'Donnell – in jeopardy?

The simple answer: to make *Halo* what it was. "If we go up there and choose to make *Halo* an Xbox game," says Butcher, reconstructing the argument, "we get to work with them at the cusp of something that has never been done before. We saw a chance to make the game better, not just in terms of making it a better game, but in terms of its impact on us and on the world. I think everyone would agree that *Halo* is a different game on the Xbox than a *Halo* game on PC with the same gameplay would have been at the time."

"Honestly I think *Halo* was so much about timing," says Greisemer. "When it came out, the platform, all the people that worked on it just happening to come together to make the perfect team to work on that game. The fact that we were in Redmond talking to the hardware guys constantly let us jump the technology forward. It was just this crucible where everything came together just in the right way." As far as the game itself goes, and the creation of the perfect alchemy of its design innovations – the two-weapon limit, the recharging shield, the checkpoints – Greisemer makes it sound easy; like riding a wave.

"We didn't have to know what we were doing, we had such powerful ideas that they just sculpted everything and we just sorta tried to stay out in front of them. Bungie's specialty is not generating ideas like that, it's recognising those ideas. It's not like we sit in a room and say, OK, let's revolutionise the health system!"

He's fairly dismissive of its much-vaunted balance, though. "Balance is not the most important part of the job. I think it's actually not super difficult to do. What's really hard is having stuff in your game that's hard-edged and different. You could make a game that's perfectly balanced where everybody just had the damage-over-time gun, right? Where everybody's health bar is decreasing at the exact same rate. What's hard is breaking out of that." He pauses and his eyes gleam mischievously. "Actually, the damage-over-time gun sounds like a genius thing."

Butcher has a much more specific, prosaic theory for what made *Halo* great – and, it turns out, what disappoints him so bitterly about *Halo 2*. "We had about four to five weeks to polish *Halo* at the end. No more than that. And that last five per cent is responsible for 30 per cent of the success of the game, or more. That's the period in which we really had a perfect storm. The team was all there, everything was working great,

the Xbox hardware was finally there and good, and we just were able to relentlessly execute on that. The entire game came together within that four- to six-week period.

"One of the things that stuns me when I think about it, and I can't believe this is true – we had none of that for *Halo 2*. Take that polish period and completely get rid of it. We miscalculated, we screwed up, we came down to the wire and we just lost all of that. So *Halo 2* is far less than it could and should be in many ways because of that. It kills me to think of it. Even the multiplayer experience for *Halo 2* is a pale shadow of what it could and should have been if we had gotten the timing of our schedule right. It's astounding to me. I fucking cannot play *Halo 2* multiplayer. I cannot do it. And that's why I know *Halo 3* is going to be so much better."

There's a fair amount of criticism of *Halo 2* amongst Bungie staff. Writer and community officer **Frank O'Connor**, an acerbic ex-pat Scot and former journalist, admits the cliffhanger ending was rather abrupt – "we drove off Thelma & Louise style". He also admits that Bungie's vocal, internal, inter-disciplinary self-analysis can be its own worst enemy sometimes: "The trick is to avoid designing or writing by committee. You have to take what's best from the input you're getting and not have it turn into that too many cooks situation."

"That's sort of what happened with *Halo 2*," agrees Greisemer. "Toward the end we were working on balancing the weapons and everybody was very vocal about a ton of things and I think eventually we just sort of polished away some of those hard edges."

But it shouldn't be confused with a lack of self-confidence, or bowing to public opinion. Bungie is a viciously self-critical organisation. "The pressure doesn't come from beating *Halo 2* or *Halo*, it's all internal," says the placid, even-tempered Jarrard. "We challenge ourselves to keep pushing further and further – nothing's ever good enough for us." It's a facet of the studio's culture that everyone speaks of approvingly – proudly, even – although director of special projects **Zach Russell** thinks a little positive reinforcement wouldn't go amiss: "I feel like we're always talking about what could be better, I kinda wish that once in a while someone would just say: 'Hey man, just so you know, what you did there is really cool'."

Russell, whose purview extends from managing external projects like Ensemble's *Halo Wars* RTS to Bungie.net's stat-tracking and Bungie's own IT infrastructure, has an infectious enthusiasm for every corner of the studio's operations. "It's passion in our IT and infrastructure, and the fact that we have hundreds of servers running lightmap rendering, that we have processes for doing distributed functionality that nobody will ever see, we have a ton of tools for tracking every single crash in our game. That translates to a really high level of quality in the game because we have such passion for really low-level details that I don't know if other people get excited about."

And it's through Bungie's discovery of these tools and processes – tools and processes that are increasingly widely adopted throughout Microsoft – that what was once an unruly creative force is finding discipline under Ryan, and hoping to avoid *Halo 2*'s crunch nightmare. "How do you go from being really really organic and essentially having no production schedule at all – which is what Bungie was really early on – into this – where there's major financial dependencies on us getting our stuff together – but still preserve that experimental thing?" asks Greisemer, framing the million-dollar question. "We now have a system for when I want to come in and do something crazy, for making it all work. In *Halo 2* I would come in and say: 'Hey we're going to do this crazy thing, and it's totally going to destroy everybody's schedule and we're going to slip and there's no process for that to get worked in'."

If anything, despite the studio's increased size and the demands of the new technology, experimentation is easier now, Bungie is even lighter on its feet, and the potential for *Halo 3* to spin off in radical new directions is considerable in a world where a new weapon, only recently conceived, can go from concept to prototype in a 'ridiculously short' length of time. "Now I feel like we've got this incredible framework and we can just go nuts and do anything we want to with this really solid foundation," Greisemer continues. "In fact, we've run into this problem where we started with a whole bunch of experiments and they turned out pretty well. Which one of these successful experiments are we not going to do?"

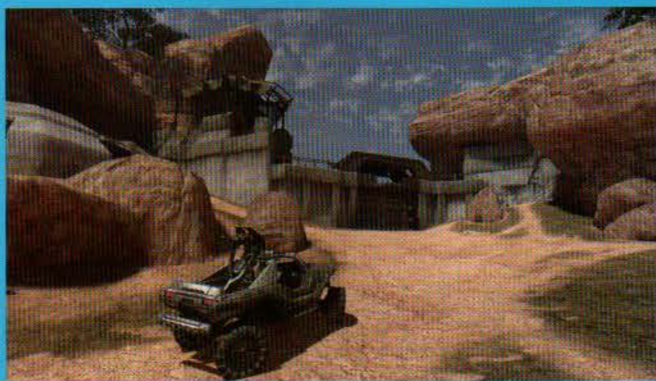
It's a good problem to have. Not an easy one, but a good one, like most of those facing Bungie: how to find more people of the calibre it already has, how to make more than one game at a time, how to work faster and better, how to stay in touch with its exponentially expanding creation, how to stay in touch with its proud self. Happily, for them and for us, Bungie seems to have a bottomless appetite for good problems.

"I had this really crazy idea for something that I'm not allowed to talk about yet," says Greisemer, "and a lot of places you'd just get shot down because it's technically very difficult or artistically hard or from a production angle it's sort of risky. But here you can get people excited about it and they're just such a bunch of geniuses that they can actually put it together and make it work."

X marks the spot

If it's possible, Bungie is being even tighter with information on *Halo 3* than on its predecessor. The two brief trailers shown so far indicate that at least some of the singleplayer campaign will take place on a ravaged Earth, and that Master Chief will possess an intriguing shield device. A multiplayer playtest with US media, ahead of the game's public beta due in spring 2007, revealed a new vehicle (the ATV-like Mongoose), weapons (the high-power Spartan laser, Covenant Spiker gun and grenade, as well a reworked assault rifle) and a 'man cannon' that can fling players across maps. Reload and contextual actions have been assigned to the bumpers, leaving the X button currently, and mysteriously, unassigned.

Bungie staff won't talk specifics about the game, but it's not difficult to goad them into generalised gushing. Greisemer says "it feels more crafted" and hints at some radical new ideas, while O'Connor reckons the strength of *Halo 3*'s singleplayer will be in its sheer scale. "Even now, you can go into the most primitive, poorly-polished encounter in any of the levels that are actually populated, and it feels better than the way you remember how awesome *Halo* was. On that first level there's a moment when you're in combat in an epic encounter, and also you can see over a ridge to another epic combat waiting for you to arrive at it. You can do something more amazing over there that you can see being set up for your arrival." Adds Greisemer: "In *Halo*, there was a lot of smoke and mirrors to make it feel better, but it was not epic combat, really. Now when you play *Halo 3*, it is."





"The **multiplayer experience** for Halo 2 is a **pale shadow** of what it could and should have been **if we'd got the timing** of our schedule right"

[Facing page] Phil Hale's stunning painting for the cover of the Halo graphic novel dominates the studio play area. This is where Bungie runs its intra-studio game pentathlon in the winter; in the summer, an outdoor pentathlon is held on the basketball court out back









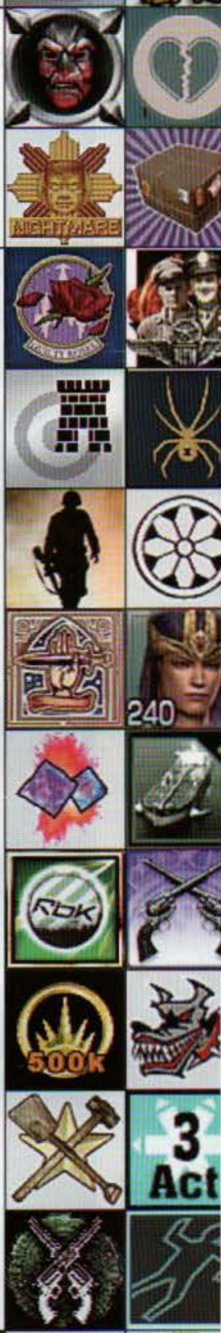




ACHIEV
UNLO





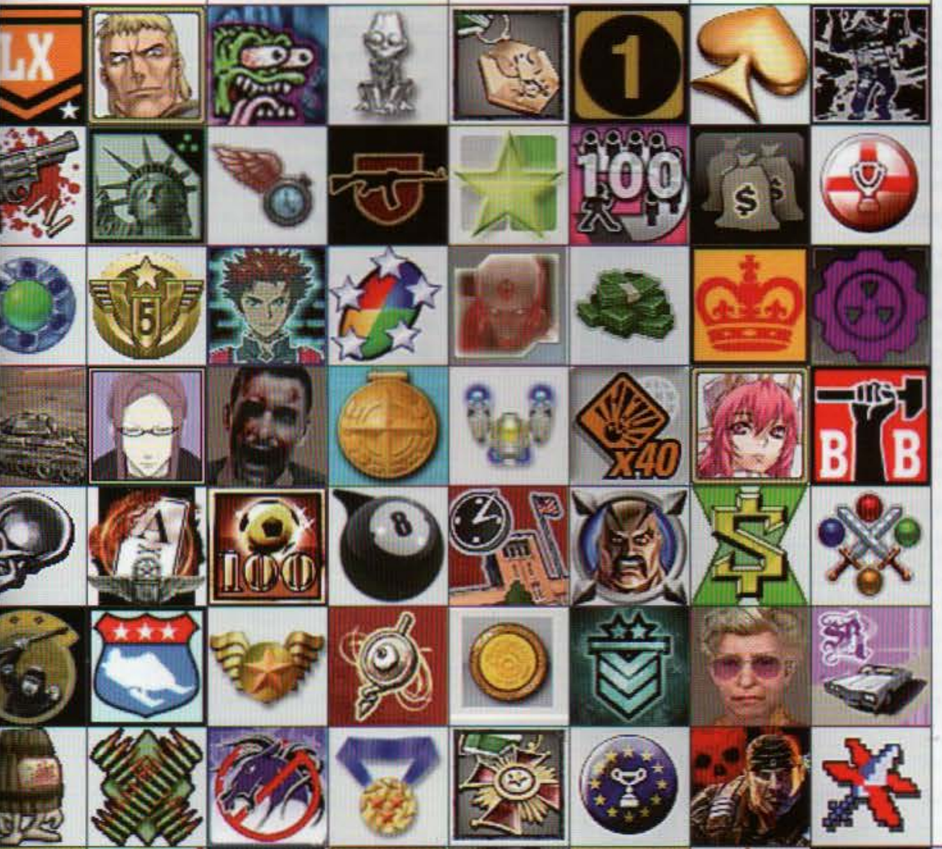


EMENTS CKED

Why does one of the least consequential virtual currencies – Xbox 360's Gamerscore – carry so much weight?

Gamers love a sense of progression. Unlockables, collectibles, secret tokens, medals, trophies, bestiaries, trinkets, cheats, percentage completion, HP +50, 'Congratulations!' ending sequences, upgrades, 'See you next game!' messages – it's all about accomplishment and reward. There is, of course, the abstract and personal satisfaction that comes from beating a challenge thrown down before you, even if it doesn't award you a new hat or double-damage bullets, but the drive to collect, and complete collections, is a potent one, and one that's truly at home in the precision frameworks and binary behaviours of videogames. And if gamers don't have an affinity with such a compulsive outlook, they've done a *really* bad job of conveying it to those who make games.

With Xbox 360, Microsoft implemented a detailed and unrivalled connection between software and hardware, which went beyond the two joining up as lock and key to make a game happen, combined with a dashboard that offered more than just the chance to enter a date of birth and choose your wallpaper. It's a humanisation of the frontend that's only perhaps matched – exceeded in warmth and personality, but certainly not detail – by the family of destructively cute Mii avatars that make themselves at home on your Wii. Among the fistful of proper-noun concepts that sit in the Gamer Profile lozenge that appears at the





UP FOR THE COUNT – FIVE STANDOUT ACHIEVEMENTS



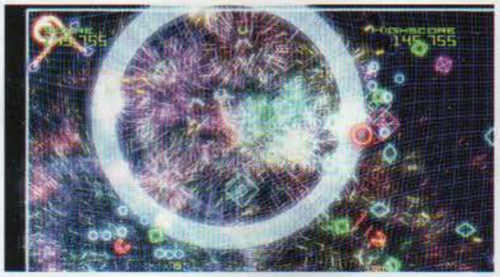
BULLET WITCH

Home to possibly the only Achievement with a sardonic sense of humour, Cavia's spell-buffed shooter offered increasingly generous Gamerpoints for completion across its first four difficulty settings. A fifth and final setting – Hell difficulty – could be unlocked. And the reward for completion of Hell mode? A single Gamerpoint, of course.



DEAD OR ALIVE 4

Although *Ninja Gaiden* could well be Itagaki's masterwork in teaching players a lesson they won't forgot – for reasons both good and bad – *Dead Or Alive 4* offered a scolding that stuck like a tattoo. Three Achievements, worth zero points, are unlocked and forever attached to those players who lose enough consecutive online matches.



GEOMETRY WARS

The Pacifism award, gained by playing for 60 seconds without firing, isn't too difficult to conquer. But given the furious and instantaneous nature of this electrifying twin-stick shooter, it's the perfect example of how Achievements, by providing a leftfield challenge, can change the way you play in a manner you'd most likely not have initiated yourself.



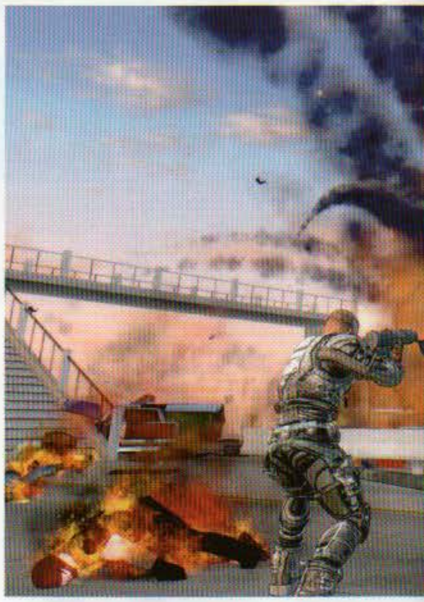
RIDGE RACER 6

The '360' Achievement may seem trivial – simply spin your car through a full rotation during a race – and requires less calories to acquire than any other to date. However the principle behind it, that of cajoling you into doing something daft but amusing, points to how the system can step away from rote rewards while still remaining accessible.



DEAD RISING

Zombie Genocider – defeat at least 53,594 zombies in one playthrough. It's not the most entertaining of Achievements to chase, and demands a repetitive strategy, but the specificity of that number adds a little something to your experience – it's the exact population of the town of Willamette, in which *Dead Rising* is set.



top of every dashboard blade – Gamertag, Gamerpic, Zone, Reputation – is your Gamerscore, a sum total and numerical representation of all your Achievements, meta-plaudits earned by fulfilling the specific conditions within each game. We've long had memory cards that record status and progress, a functional and detached holding bay that, in terms of your gaming lineage, only contains a bare retrospective link to the past – sure, they can record a story, but it's you that needs to tell it. With Achievements, you now have a biography, a personal rundown of where you've been and what you've done, all collected under the banner of one score and one CV. Rifling through someone's Achievements history via the 360 dashboard – or, indeed, their Xbox.com profile – offers an insight into their tastes and dedication that's much more telling than sneaking into their home and mooching through the games they have on their shelf. With each Achievement unlocked, a dash of Gamerpoints are added to that ever-increasing Gamerscore; all standard retail games have between five and 50 Achievements, totalling 1,000 Gamerpoints, while Live Arcade titles have a fixed quotient of 12 per game, offering 200 points in all.

Microsoft defines Achievements, via Xbox.com, as '…game-defined goals that are stored and displayed in your Gamer Profile. Achievements can be as simple, complex or off-the-wall as a game wants'. The latter part of that description may be true, but there are certain dependable patterns that have emerged

Crackdown, **due for release in early 2007, is due to take superior advantage of Achievements, centring them on the freeform, minigame-style goals within its chemistry set game world, then subsequently tying them into Live leaderboards**







in the year since 360's release, a now-familiar outline that throws the term 'Achievements' itself into question. Most games offer a graduated drip-feed of awards, which begins with the completion of a tutorial or something equally token, and often ends with 100 per cent completion or an act of extreme dedication, interspersed with accomplishments for everything in between. Most, however, aren't so much Achievements as simply milestones, a

With Xbox 360, Microsoft implemented a detailed and unrivalled connection between console software and hardware, which went beyond the two joining up as lock and key to make a game happen

hard-coded progress report. That's not to completely undercut their worth, but to acknowledge where the emphasis on their function currently lies, marking them out more as a reward system for time invested by a valued customer of the console itself, rather than an actual measure of talent, which engenders an attachment to the machine that goes beyond the line of game spines that sit on the shelf.

While some games apply imagination to their Achievement lists, either in the nature of certain standouts, or the completeness of their distribution, others are so dim that simply completing the game in vanilla fashion is enough to reap the full grand. And it's this lack of consistency that denies Gamerscores their role as being a measure of talent – place two tallies side by side and it's just not possible to reverse engineer the respective niftiness of the fingers that generated them. One could be built on many pained, but proficient, hours requiring the expert deconstruction of *Smash TV*, *Ridge Racer 6*, *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, *Chrome Hounds*, *Hitman: Blood Money* and *Call Of Duty 2*. Another may simply be formed by casual trawls through *Cloning Clyde*, *King Kong* and any number of US sports titles (although this has largely changed since last year's editions) or animated-movie tie-ins that cough out Gamerscore points like a fruit machine with a guilty conscience. It's a currency whose true value is chaotic, composed as it is from both hard-earned overtime and the easy money of windfalls. And this isn't so much flawed regulation as the blanket-application nature of Achievements; some games aren't designed for an audience that will push themselves, but all 360 games must feature them.

There's another metric at work behind it all, too, albeit an insular one: status. Through a Live-activated Gamer Profile, you're YouTube-ing your gaming career, broadcasting yourself, in what is console gamers' own answer to MySpace. It's a talking point for friends who are playing a game during the same period, with each tricksy Achievement earned a potential shared interest, a spur to also claim it for yourself, or simply a benign form of jovial stalking that lets you catch up on what your virtual social circle has been up to while you were offline. But, away from the closed playing field of the Friends List, it begins to touch upon the bragging rights and communion of the MMORPG: whole communities gather to discuss Achievements, their details and exploits and watch the world's most industrious Achievement collectors claim elite loot via the leaderboards of data-tracking website MyGamerCard.net (which, to date, logs more than 750,000 Live users, and the two billion Gamerpoints they bring with them). Clans gather to help one another work together in online games for Achievement 'trading', not to mention the grind present in earning the Achievements of games such as *Rumble Roses XX* and, more extremely, *Final Fantasy XI*, which could push playtime into the realms of thousands of hours for unflinching completists. And to extend the MMO analogy to breaking point, there's even a player-killer spin-off at work, which can swing both ways, with Achievement hunters potentially stumping the fun of others in team matches or quitting ranked games if things aren't the way they want. Conversely, Gamerscore whores, as some would have it, risk mockery as much as kudos. Someone joining an online game and admitting they're 'just there for the Achievements' is just



PopCap's games are renowned for being PC distractions, honeytraps for casual gamers. When *Bejeweled 2*, *Zuma* and *Astropop* arrived on Live Arcade, it was perhaps to emphasise their depth beyond a reputation for diversion that they presented some of the weightiest Achievements yet seen

MASTER 'CHIEVE



There are many sites dedicated to collecting, listing and interpreting the data that makes up a Gamer Profile. One in particular, however – www.achieve360points.com – has an inside track to the world of Achievements. It seems that as soon as preview code for a 360 game is circulated among the press, anywhere in the world, its Achievements swiftly appear on the site's burgeoning database. This is a list that's subsequently fleshed out with the corresponding icons (the images that you see scattered around the pages of this feature), identification of any secrets and, eventually, guides and FAQs for those Achievements. There's the obvious drawback of spoilers with such a site but then there's also the undeniable attraction of getting to see the content of a forthcoming game that's been traced out by such a list.





as likely to receive a series of sneers and a boot from the host than any compliance.

Nonetheless, it's galling to see someone get hold of a copy of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, tear through it in accordance with Achievement requirements, and never return to it after three days of fast-track play. It's somewhat soulless to see games recycled back to their raw state of numbers, completing an industrious but demeaning circle of life. The trouble with collecting things for the sake of it is that it's the outcome, and not the means, that receives the emphasis. But, again conversely, there's no denying the effort and actual achievement displayed by some of the top-ranked players in the world. Not that those denials don't exist, of course – Achievements, like any online culture worth its salt and spittle, has its own controversies. It wasn't long after 360's launch that the Gamerscore community discovered Gamer Profiles were region-free, allowing them to be swapped between consoles from different regions. This meant that Achievements from region-locked titles could be ploughed into the same account if you had access to imported consoles. Plenty of games even have region-locked Achievements meaning that, if you were solvent and maniacal enough, you could play through three versions of *Enchanted Arms* (EU, US, Japan), gleaning 3,000 Gamerpoints as you went. Obviously, this became an essential, if unsporting, advantage to push you ever closer to the top of the Achievements leaderboard. And, if steroids weren't enough, doubts are now being cast by the spectre of another bionic upgrade: game-save exploits. It's this dupe that's sent the dedicated Achievement community into its first uproar, especially with the advent of the current Gamerscore leader – StripClubDJ – who passed the 100,000 mark at the end of November, the glory dogged by hate mail and bilious comments, and clouded by the fuzz of the fact that save-exploiters are often dedicated players. And, as a sidenote, two of the longest-serving Leaderboard toppers, Rance6 and ST TheKing, have bowed out of the Gamerscore race after lengthy stints on the throne.



MyGamerCard.net (top) tracks over 750,000 users, but isn't a complete reflection of Live usage. Xbox360Achievements.org (middle) has developed its own unofficial leaderboard that's aiming to be free from cheaters, while LevelMy360.com (above) offers to earn your Achievements for you, for a price

Any calls for Microsoft to root out and punish cheaters only go to illustrate how largely hands-off the company has been with regards to Achievements, at least in the public eye. Dashboard updates have gone some way to tackling exploits, but there's been no official crackdown as such. And it's questionable how plausible it would be to police the system when, say, multiple players could invest their energies into a single Gamer Profile account without it ever having to leave its host machine. So, from the player's perspective, Achievements have felt like a contract between them and the developer; guidelines are in place to provide regulation, but it's ultimately a devco's choice, within those limitations, of how to tempt and reward players, and ultimately your own choice as to which you pursue. The Achievements system is a self-contained one, accompanying a game's content, not controlling it, their greatest influence to steer the player in a certain direction. Which raises an interesting question – what if Microsoft was to turn the Achievements system into an actual reward scheme instead of a virtual one? To

Rifling through someone's Achievements history via the 360 dashboard offers an insight into a person's tastes and dedication that's more telling than sneaking into their home


At the time of writing, and according to statistics available via MyGamerCard.net, very, very few games haven't had their full Achievement lists cracked by some player or other. One persists since the console's launch – *Smash TV*'s Game Master award, for completing the game on one credit, is yet to topple

THE LONG ARMS


Viral Achievements have become a sudden trend, with *Tony Hawk's Project 8* and *Blitz: The League* offering ones transmitted through online play. The most interesting of these is the Six Degrees virus in *Small Arms*, which offers a rank based on how close you were to origin – developer Gastronaut Studios – when you acquired it. Playing directly against the developer offers a 'level one' Six Degrees Achievement, while, one week after release, the highest recorded by Gastronaut is level six. "While we don't have a great system for tracking the Achievement, people seem to be getting it easily, within their first few matches," says Don Wurster, co-director of Gastronaut. "I'd estimate we seeded 50 with the first degree on release." Data regarding Six Degrees' spread isn't easy to come by, which is where sites such as MyGamerCard.net will prove to be invaluable.





Q&A JASON YOUNG, MYGAMERCARD.NET

MyGamerCard.net's GamerCards (versatile representations of a Gamer Profile) were created before anyone outside of Microsoft ever had a Gamerscore. But why did they come about in the first place?
The original idea behind MGC, providing public GamerCards for users to place anywhere, was mine, back in October 2005. Microsoft had just unveiled 360's profile system and people wanted ways to place it on their MySpace pages, or in forum signatures. Since Microsoft's way of providing it was rather limiting, I set out to create the easiest system I could. I created it mostly for fun – but now MGC provides nearly five million GamerCards per day to gamers from right around the world.

MGC.net is now 'An official Microsoft community developer'. When and how did this come about?
Technically, it happened around March 2006. Microsoft and I had begun contact in November 2005 (probably because of the server troubles the service was causing them), and we formed a relationship that spawned the Xbox Community Developer Program. This enables many websites to provide rich data about Live activity to the rest of the community.



With regards to cheating – in terms of Gamerscore (ie. profile/save swaps) – do you have any plans to tackle this and the way it affects the leaderboards?
I can't specifically discuss MGC's future plans, but we do take legitimacy very seriously. It's worth the effort to try and control it, but only if it can be done in an automated way. Nobody's going to want to check every game from more than 750,000 accounts.

What is your take on the Achievements system? And are you worried about it encouraging a culture where the Gamerscore becomes more important than the games themselves?
I think Achievements are a wonderful idea. I do become concerned when Gamerscore becomes a focal point in the game – especially when it drives people to be poor sports and attempt to ruin the gaming experience for everyone else. However, the same goes for developers who don't take Achievements seriously enough. I would be willing to bet that most gamers spent extra time playing *Call Of Duty 2* specifically to run through Veteran difficulty, whereas they may not have considered doing it before.



Do you feel that calling them Achievements is something of a misnomer, as so many of them are more like milestones? And do you feel it's unfair that those Achievements centred on online play become harder to earn when the online user-base begins to taper off?
I agree, many of them are simply milestones in gameplay, and even just activities within the game in many cases. Achievements in regards to online play aren't in general unfair, but it's dependent on how they're implemented. One part of me thinks that "Become number one on the leaderboard" is a ridiculous Achievement. On the other hand, who says you should be able to succeed in all of a game's Achievements? Sometimes you just don't have what it takes to take down 1,000 other people. That's fine, and there shouldn't be anything wrong with not having that Achievement – it's a debate that'll persist for years.

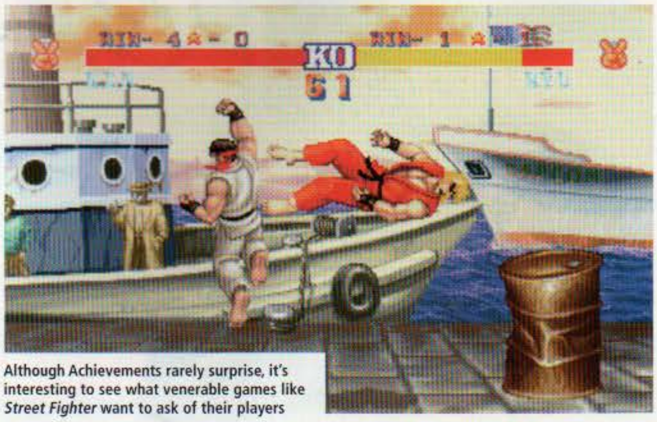






offer, say, prizes and exclusive merchandise in return for reaching a certain target? We've no problem with players being given incentives to *buy* more games by publishers, manufacturers and retailers – bundles, special offers, tournaments leading to cash and small-scale fame, or even Nintendo's Stars Catalogue scheme – and no qualms about a developer attempting to get you to spend as much time as possible within the world that they've created for you. But for a console manufacturer to suddenly offer solid, tangible compensation for the sheer number of hours spent sat in front of console – and time, currently, is the biggest factor in unlocking the great majority of Achievements – is a whole new proposition, one that probably wouldn't sit well with those poised to pounce on and denounce the supposedly addling and ruinous 'addiction' inherent in videogames, and equally likely one that Microsoft has considered.

Achievements are a take-it-or-leave-it system that are painless to overlook, but have been a visible success in hooking and hypnotising certain factions of gamers the world over. Modern videogames, despite their rigid rules and boundaries, remain a kind of bedlam – they swirl with possibilities, side-goals to fret over, bestiaries to complete, secret packages to root out and ratings to perfect on top of whatever 'completion' is offered by the game's plot or main quest. Achievements offer a whole other kind of closure, a clean and airtight framework to direct you around the game, from its core to its outer edges. Throughout 360's first year of existence, Achievements have largely chosen not to deviate from conservative territory, arguably tapping compulsion rather than imagination, but developers are becoming more adept at spreading them well across a game's girth. And, between them all, they've already covered plenty of ground – which speaks volumes for the relationship of expectations between gamer and game creator, from the utterly trivial (name a piñata pet in *Viva Piñata*), to the cynical (purchase ten items of branded Ecko Unlimited clothing in *Test Drive Unlimited*), to the quirky (complete a stage with precisely 47 kills in *Hitman: Blood Money*), to the knowingly ridiculous (earn a total of 10,000 online kills in *Gears Of War*). They're a peripheral, optional element, sure, but there's scope to offer challenges that don't have to conform to a game's own internal logic. And there's further power still to be drawn upon – and for proof of that, you need only look to that crowd of *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* players who, on the whim of an Achievement, were coaxed into holding fire in a game where shooting is the whole point.



Although Achievements rarely surprise, it's interesting to see what venerable games like *Street Fighter* want to ask of their players


mui mui!





AS TWELVE MONTHS OF HARDWARE HYPE COME TO AN END, WAS 2006 REALLY A GAMING REVOLUTION?

Transition. It's a funny word to use about an industry that's supposed to be surging forward at a continually breakneck speed, but it's the one that's often assigned to years such as this. Xbox 360 finding its feet, Nintendo and Sony as focused on PR offensives as hardware revisions, and armies of gamers more than usually distracted by the 'what could be' rather than enjoying the 'what already is'. But, despite the irresistible car-crash captivation that keen launch-watchers know all too well, 2006 was a great year to forget the games industry entirely and instead focus on the games themselves. It's hard to remember a time when gamers were so well supplied with games that seduce you into locking the door, drawing the curtains and stepping from this world into another; games that envelop your senses with impeccably imagined worlds, flood your brain with challenges and choices, put dread in your gut and gladness in your heart: that take you from one reality and give you a new one. Maybe transition is the right word after all. Read on to see which games did it best in 2006.



THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST GAME



FINAL FANTASY XII

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

This simply doesn't happen. Name one film, one book, one TV series, even one symphony where the 12th is the best. But after a slump where first *VIII*, then *IX*, then *X* and *XI* alienated one portion of the series' fanbase after another, *XII* wipes the slate clean with dazzling audacity. It may horrify purists, but this is a game which understands that *FF*'s identity doesn't lie in line-dancing, random battles and casting Firaga on ice enemies. *FFXII* understands that *FF* must be inexhaustibly epic, wholly absorbing and never, not for a second, less than beautiful. Even leaving aside the exquisite artistry of its visual and sound design, the wise, generous and innovative approach of *FFXII* is gaming's best blueprint for the future.

RUNNERS-UP

OKAMI

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO



It's simple scale that attracts your attention: places, characters, attacks, tunes, jokes, spectacles and puzzles. It's the overall excellence, however, which holds it – a virtuoso epic that forms a fitting eulogy for Clover's creative powerhouse.

TWILIGHT PRINCESS

FORMAT: GC, Wii
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Why try to better every game in the *Zelda* series when you could just *be* every game in the *Zelda* series? An exhaustive compendium of all that is best-loved in these best-loved of games, *Twilight Princess* is in many respects the oddest launch title ever.

THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST INNOVATION



Wii

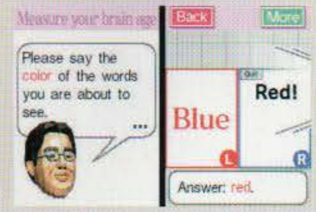
MANUFACTURER: NINTENDO

It's a year since the full extent of Nintendo's revolution was unveiled, and in that time we've become blasé about the controller that thinks it's a TV remote, the console that doesn't rely on a spec sheet, and the depth of interest it provokes in 50-something non-gamers. But, considered afresh, the Wii is as disruptive as Nintendo's press releases insist – technically, commercially and creatively. There's a reason, of course, that this machine is winning the innovation award rather than the hardware award: it still has a lot to prove. But it has already earned its place as a bold experiment, a valuable risk and a litmus test for the viability of the idea of games for people, not games for gamers.

RUNNERS-UP

BRAIN TRAINING

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



It sounds like a particularly vicious version of GDC's yearly Game Design Challenge: make competitive arithmetic fun. But this most serious of DS games provided a masterclass in Nintendo's understanding of fun, and its expertise in delivering it.

MARKETPLACE

FORMAT: 360
DEVELOPER: MICROSOFT



From the *Lost Planet* demo to the horse armour scandal, Marketplace has spent the year shaking up 360. Bringing It Home may sound like a cheesy slogan, but the reality has unified the console's users as neatly as it has hardware and software.



THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST VISUAL DESIGN



OKAMI

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: CLOVER STUDIO

'Screenshots can't do it justice' is the cliché, but in *Okami*'s case it doesn't apply. They *could*, but only if printed on handmade Japanese washi instead of FSC-certified mass-produced paper. And lit from behind with a dense glow and a flicker of shadow. And if, instead of a flat spray of printed ink, the colours were layered into place with swirling brushes and lucent paints. And if those images were stacked in an infinite flick-book, so you could pore over every frame of immaculate animation, every quirk of charismatic character design, every goose-pimpling, throat-tightening transition from gloom to glorious, blooming life. Masterpiece is the other cliché, and that, in *Okami*'s case, does apply.

THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST AUDIO DESIGN



DRAGON QUEST VIII

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Sound awards are always the source of passionate debate: what are you rewarding? Is it the sound effects or the music? The technical implementation or the creative flair? Is it the voice acting, the voice recording, or the scripting? This year there were no arguments. *Dragon Quest VIII* simplifies things by excelling in every field. From the engaging script to the bold choice of western voice actors, from the enchanting music to the generous decision to rely on an orchestral recording rather than synthesisers, to the spot effects that enliven the magnificently maniacal enemies (just think of the squeak of a doodling Khalamari Kid's crayons), there's not a sound you hear from game start to game end that dips below brilliance.

RUNNERS-UP

JUST CAUSE

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: AVALANCHE



There were no shortage of contenders for seamless worlds full of dappled foliage this year, but *Just Cause*'s acid skies, honeyed sunsets and bird's-eye perspectives made gliding through its air-space an unforgettable indulgence.

LOCOROCO

FORMAT: PSP
PUBLISHER: SCEI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



It's a sign of well-placed confidence that Sony included a screenshot mode in *LocoRoco*, a game where witnessing is often just as rewarding as winning. A joyous antidote to the jaggy mud of many sub-PS2 PSP titles, it's a timeless piece of design.

RUNNERS-UP

DEFCON

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: INTROVERSION
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



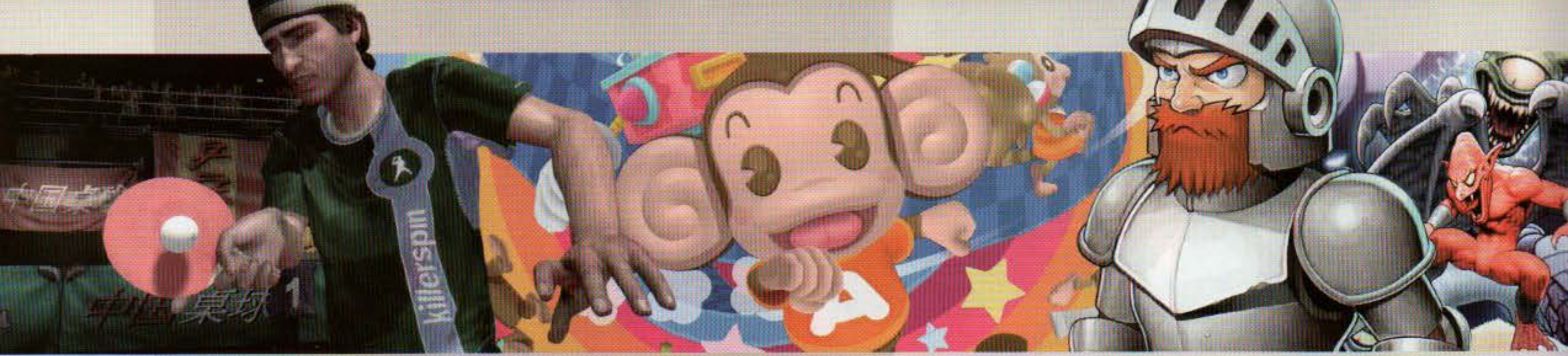
It has no plot and no characters and yet has brought grown men to tears. *Defcon*'s exceptional sound design deserves no small share of the credit for the emotional and aesthetic impact of Introversion's luminously deadly war sim.

TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT

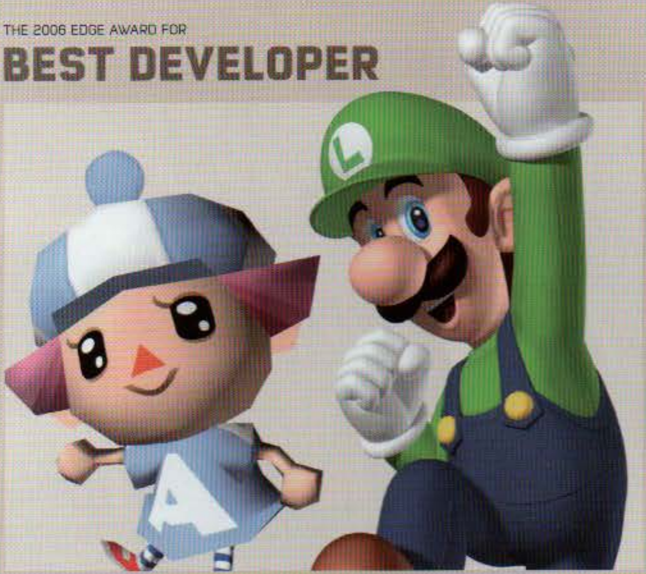


From kerb to concrete, cobble to crack, boardwalk to bannister – like some skate-culture skew on synaesthesia – you'll want to grind every inch of *Project 8*'s world just to sound it out, as a next-gen world takes shape through your ears.



THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST DEVELOPER



NINTENDO

GAMES: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS, ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD, BRAIN TRAINING, NEW SUPER MARIO BROS, Wii SPORTS, RHYTHM TENGOKU

So what does Nintendo's future hold, now that it has eschewed game industry traditions? If this year's roster is any clue, it's a breadth of approach and level of excellence that no other company can match. From the traditional appeal of Mario and Zelda, to the characterful quirks of *Animal Crossing* and *Rhythm Tengoku*, the disruptive daring of *Brain Training* and the arcade accessibility of *Wii Sports*, Nintendo's 2006 portfolio – particularly when a hardware launch would have given it a reasonable excuse for taking its eye off the software ball – has been peerless. And who knows where this new attitude could take the firm next year?

THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST PUBLISHER



TAKE TWO

GAMES: THE ELDER SCROLLS: OBLIVION, PREY, ROCKSTAR PRESENTS TABLE TENNIS, AMPED 3, GTA: LIBERTY/VICE CITY STORIES, TOP SPIN 2, CIVCITY: ROME, CANIS CANEM EDIT

Just a few years ago, the idea of Take Two adding studios as revered as Irrational and Firaxis to its books would have seemed fanciful. But after a year of well-chosen and carefully husbanded game projects, it's easy to see why Ken Levine and Sid Meier have spoken so warmly of their new owners. Rather than the rabbit-in-the-headlights relationship some publishers have with the might of EA, Take Two has forged a more distinctive idea of its own identity, and its 2006 games show that strength isn't born of sports games and movie licences alone. Original ideas and high standards of execution have been crucial cornerstones for its achievements this year.

RUNNERS-UP

CAPCOM

GAMES: GOD HAND, OKAMI, DEAD RISING, ULTIMATE GHOSTS 'N' GOBLINS, VIEWTIFUL JOE: DOUBLE TROUBLE



The news of Clover's demise may have stung, but its crowning glories contribute to another stellar year of resolutely 'gamey' – and restlessly creative – projects from a company that's rarely content to rest on its considerable laurels for long.

SQUARE ENIX

GAMES: FINAL FANTASY XII, DRAGON QUEST VIII, DRAGON QUEST: ROCKET SLIME, PROJECT SYLPHEED, MARIO HOOPS



To make two games as excellent as *DQVIII* and *FFXII* and not win developer of the year may seem unfair; then again, to make games as excellent as those – and reap their deserved and phenomenal sales – is a reward in itself.

RUNNERS-UP

VALVE

GAMES: HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 1, THE SHIP, DEFCON, SIN EPISODES, DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC



Valve's nomination for this award came partly because we weren't sure if it qualified. Part distributer, part publisher, part developer, there's no model for it and the games it supports through Steam. No model, and no peer.

SEGA

GAMES: YAKUZA, MEDIEVAL 2: TOTAL WAR, FOOTBALL MANAGER 2007, OUTRUN 2: COAST TO COAST



Not developer of the year, certainly, after the disappointments of some of its key properties, but 2006 was the year that Sega's collaborations with western developers such as The Creative Assembly, Sumo and Sports Interactive really paid off.



THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE



TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

FORMAT: 360 PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: EDEN

There's a great deal of excitement in gaming academia about socialising and communicating in MMOs, but *Test Drive Unlimited* is a compelling demonstration of something most online players love: a lack of communication. *Test Drive*'s tropical magic is as much born out of the silent hum of community that surrounds its sparkling roads. There's little to beat the anonymous camaraderie of cruising past a stranger who's also slowed down to enjoy the stunning views. And, of course, *TDU* proved just as adept at delivering the more traditional, structured kind of online play, with friendly clubhouses and bitter duels proving that even in the most idyllic of settings, winning and losing are universal languages.

RUNNERS-UP

ANIMAL CROSSING DS

FORMAT: DS
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Always seen as a communication game, *Animal Crossing* had to wait three generations for the DS to arrive. Convivial, therapeutic and absorbing, it's the perfect online antidote to conventional counterstrikes and battlefields.

GHOST RECON: AW

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



It's amazing how long online gaming has taken to notice that friends want to play together. Co-op proved *Advanced Warfighter*'s defining attraction for many, not least for its capacity for comic chaos as well as well-executed attacks.

THE 2006 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST HARDWARE



DS LITE

MANUFACTURER: NINTENDO

You have to wonder how early on in the DS's lifespan Nintendo decided on its transformation from plug-ugly paperweight to style-conscious sliver – and how much longer the rest of us had to wait to touch it. But, however vexing being seduced into replacing a perfectly good piece of hardware always is, there's no denying the appeal of the Lite, both in pictures and in practice. Clean and compact, its glossy perfection still manages to retain the sense of robustness that makes the DS such a stress-free handheld to own. The shallowness of the GBA slot is an annoyance to some, but a sensible recognition of how few owners take advantage of it, and the improved stylus and stunning screens more than compensate.

RUNNERS-UP

Wii REMOTE

MANUFACTURER: NINTENDO



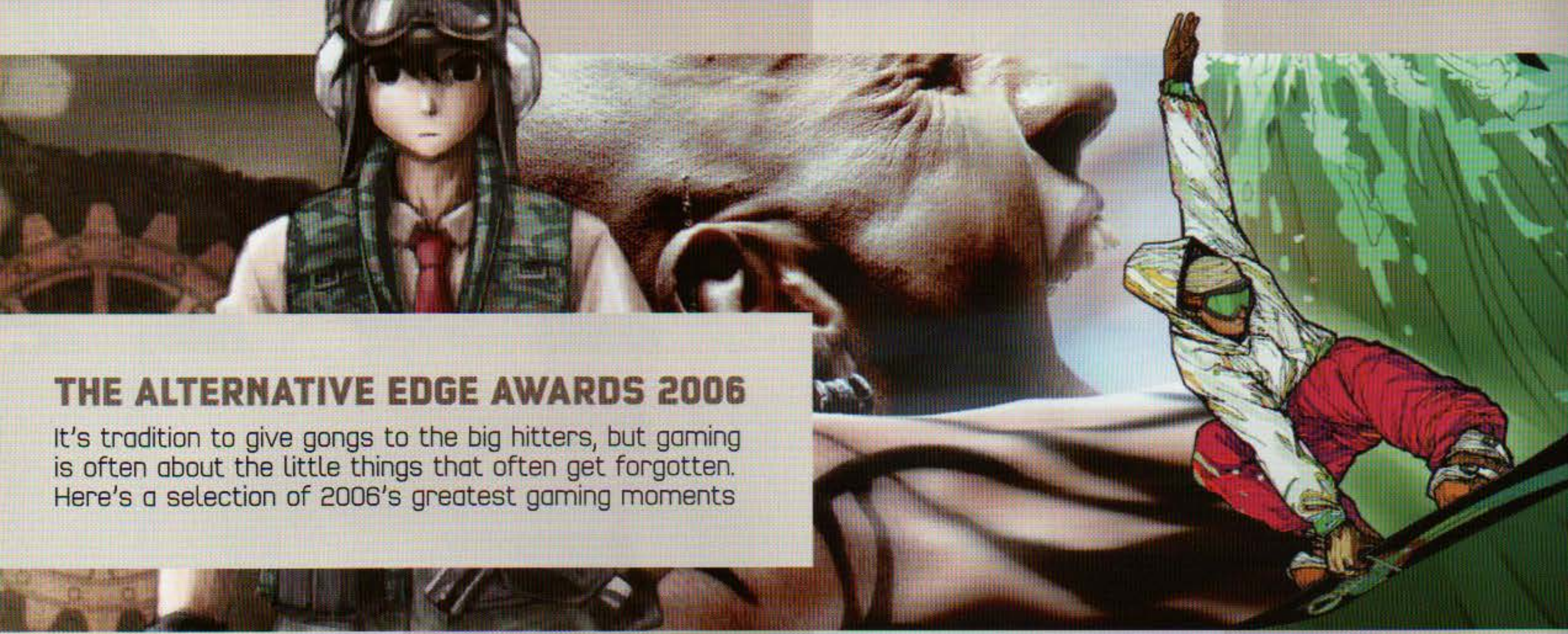
It may still need a library of compelling software, but the Remote has already proved a hardware delight: the delicious thrill of rumble, the surprise success of the tiny speaker, and its precision in motion all living up to the hype.

PLAYSTATION 2

MANUFACTURER: SONY



On its last legs? Don't you believe it. With a stellar lineup, a bargain price, appealing colour choices, integrated online capabilities, tiny size and near-silent running, it's sometimes hard to see how the new kids expect to compete.



THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS 2006

It's tradition to give gongs to the big hitters, but gaming is often about the little things that often get forgotten. Here's a selection of 2006's greatest gaming moments

CELL POWER

TOWER BLOXX

FORMAT: MOBILE
DEVELOPER: DIGITAL CHOCOLATE



After years of disappointment, this year finally brought a mainstream mobile game no one could argue with. Classy, immediate and enduringly engaging, *Tower Bloxx* ends the debate about whether or not mobile games can be good, and starts a new one about why they so rarely are.

SING STARS

AMPED 3

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: TAKE TWO
DEVELOPER: INDIE BUILT



"Thank you thank you thank you for playing our game. We're sorry sorry sorry sorry if the story was lame." Why more games don't climax with a lavish musical number expressing gratitude to the player, humility from the developers and an exhortation to end it all by pressing A, we've not the least idea.

CLONE WARS

OBLIVION

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: TAKE TWO
DEVELOPER: BETHESDA



Cut down in its prime by a pesky patch, *Oblivion*'s cloning glitch left many players with happy memories of unleashing an avalanche of bottles down a cobbled hill path, or stranding unsuspecting guardsmen in a sea of trousers. Well worth having to watch it at three frames-per-minute.

FLAG WAVING

CANIS CANEM EDIT

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: TAKE 2
DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER



It was heartening enough to gain access to a perfect hideaway for geeks, complete with drawn curtains and alluring arcade cabs. But more heartening still was an air of familiarity about their chosen logo. Could it be that Erse is as widely read at Bullworth Academy as it is in Vice City?

MEME ME UP

PS3

MANUFACTURER: SONY



It may have been stingingly bitter, and a little misguided, but it was impossible to resist the infectious exuberance of the internet's response to Sony's lacklustre E3 press conference. Fans of outsized crustaceans who aren't gamers must still be amazed at the upsurge in interest in their hobby.

THE PHANTOM

GIZMONDO

FORMAT: FERRARI ENZO
DRIVER: STEFAN ERIKSSON



No, not that other console that never quite materialised, but the second **Edge** Award in a row for the unstoppably entertaining Gizmondo scandal. There was a worldwide wince when the first photos of the totalled Enzo surfaced – which Eriksson blamed on the driving of his invisible friend Dietrich.

STEAK OUT

SNEAK KING

FORMAT: 360, XBOX
PUBLISHER: KING GAMES
DEVELOPER: BLITZ GAMES



Even now, there's an urge to shout in terror at the sight of this shot. The juxtaposition of royalty, stalking, processed meat and vulnerable young women makes *Manhunt* look like Jackanory. Yet, if advergaming can maintain this much weird charisma, it might not be such a bleak prospect after all.

LIMITED SAGA

METAL SAGA

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: ATLUS
DEVELOPER: CREA-TECH



In a world of bloated, exhausting RPGs, there's nothing quite like the discovery that, simply by asking to, you can accelerate from *Metal Saga*'s title screen to closing credits in under two minutes. And, weirdly, what better way to lure you back to explore the deranged detail you missed by skipping ahead?



STEPS TO HEAVEN

GOD HAND

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The one simple thing that makes great Capcom games great is the sensation that the people who design them actually play them. True or not, only a gaming veteran could have predicted the joy that *God Hand*'s ladder-leaping shortcut would bring to players bored of inch-worming their way to the top.

FACE LIFT

SAINT'S ROW

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: VOLITION



The game itself may have fumbled its tone often enough, but its extraordinary character creation tool – seemingly deliberately designed to ease the creation of inbred, buck-toothed, low-brow, fat-eared, slack-jawed misfits, meant that every in-engine cutscene could be relied upon to deliver a laugh.

HERO NAGOSHI

YAKUZA

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



There was no mistaking that *Yakuza* was a labour of love, but for long-term **Edge** readers that love went two ways. For those who remember creator Toshihiro Nagoshi's columns, encountering his obsessions in-game – particularly the detailed lectures on different whiskies – was like meeting up with an old friend.

LIKE A BIRD

WIRELESS CONTROLLERS

FORMAT: 360, PS2, WII
MANUFACTURER: MICROSOFT, SONY, NINTENDO



Mark 2006 in history. This was the year, the hallowed year, when wired controllers ceased their reign of terror, snagging passing feet, topping beer bottles and tugging consoles onto floors. We step now into a future where baffled children will ask in affronted tones: 'They used to have *whats*?'

GOLLY!

LOCOROCO

FORMAT: PSP
PUBLISHER: SCEI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The videogame world isn't great at philosophical debates, so watching it rise to the challenge of grappling with the implications of *LocoRoco*'s unfortunate series of character design decisions became one of the best spectator sports of the year. At least you could salve your conscience by playing it on a white PSP.

COP A FEEL

DEAD RISING

FORMAT: 360
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Capcom may be the last remaining developer who really understands how to give good boss, but *Dead Rising*'s obese lesbian sado-masochistic child-molester ranks as 2006's most shocking moment, and most heart-felt victory. Strike a blow for peace and decency with a super-heated frying pan and a pistol.

PLAY MONEY

PLAYSTATION STORE

FORMAT: PS3
DEVELOPER: SONY



You'll know, of course, that each Wii point costs a six-hundredths of a penny less than a Microsoft point, so £7.50 buys 1,000 Wiis, but only 926 MSes. Or that you could instead spend that money on 4,013 Linden Dollars. Or you could defect to Sony, and its crazy, wonderful idea of using actual money as its currency.

HAPPY FEET

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

EVENT: E3 2006



Harrison shared his bath water, Moore flashed some flesh, but Miyamoto stole the E3 spotlight with nothing more than a soft-shoe shuffle as he conducted the Wii *Zelda* medley that opened the show. Even the most hardened cynics in the audience warmed to his good-natured grooving.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Tony Hawk's Project 8



With multiple trick lines ready, online play beckons. Although the absence of Horse mode cannot be forgiven, Graffiti mode across the whole game world eases the pain
360, ACTIVISION

Another Code: Two Memories



Another Code's gentle puzzles are all but forgotten, ironic considering its subtitle, but being an adolescent detective is good practise for the forthcoming grown-up *Hotel Dusk*
DS, NINTENDO

Gears Of War



It's not the gameplay, the gunplay or the co-op, it's the sheer visceral joy of using a chainsaw to turn an opponent into a thick, wet red mist that keeps us coming back for more
360, MICROSOFT

Kryptonite factor

Who has the mettle for the Man of Steel?



Unlike earlier titles which flew into the ground, *Superman Returns* at least set its sights unachievably high. The prospect of a *Superman Returns Returns* might terrify EA after recent sales figures, but perhaps that's what it takes

Somehow, gaming has once again disappointed the Man of Steel at a time when anything is supposed to be possible. We can build great cities, fly to the greatest heights and tackle the greatest foes, but we still can't do them all at once.

The problem, as it has always been, is expectation: the more technology can do, the more Superman should. But the demands of such a curve for developers are exponentially complex. Give him freedom of flight and his world must expand, all-conquering power and his enemies must learn how to resist, strength to move mountains and mountains must allow themselves to be moved.

Remember when licences were the easy option? Once, you simply translated your pre-existing world into the game environment du jour, be it side-scrolling, isometric floorplan or breeze block cityscape. Actors were then assigned their basic roles – cackling villain, mute thug, patient mentor – and a game that people had played a dozen times before succeeded by default.

But now superheroes must *be* superheroes, not just sprite or shell swaps for shoot 'em up ships or beat 'em up vigilantes. Just as Superman defies the laws of nature on the silver screen and in comic book panels, you can't expect him to grace 360 without breaking a few videogame conventions.

No wonder EA's most reliable internal studio found itself breaking its back. It says much of the insidious nature of the curse that *Superman Returns* scores so poorly this month, even when it fleetingly provides the most authentic experience yet.

Ironically, it's only when the game just evaporates around you and leaves you floating in its skies that you finally feel the cape reach around your shoulders. The wind beats against your ears in 5.1, the sound barrier breaks around you as you pick up speed, and in a simple moment of distraction you drop to a nearby rooftop, walking to its lip to appreciate all that could have been in the city down below.

What EA and its opponents in Superman fandom need to realise is that there, at the point where you can look out over a job half done, is where the game that everyone wants begins. Superman might waste an awful lot of peoples' time and money, but his curse is that they never have the nerve to spend enough.





Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

FORMAT: PS3 **PRICE:** $60 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MARCH (UK) **PUBLISHER:** SCEA
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E164, E169, E170



Ratchet & Clank's skill points system returns, with bonuses for completing certain acts outlined by cryptic hints. The rewards are far from worthwhile, but this could be the first time we're sad to see the lack of a big head mode, to help tame aiming



Resistance is nowhere near as drab as it initially appears. In fact, it's something much, much worse – a firstperson shooter that gets better the more it's played, flashing moments of brilliance before your eyes in an experience that can feel all too empty in its dimmest moments. It means that all flavours of fanboy will find something to point at to justify whatever pre-release stance they've settled on, and never need to change their tune: believers will feel rewarded, doubters will feel justified. Forget the effortless hardware showcasing of *Wii Sports*, might this be the perfect launch game, after all?

Let's start with doubter's territory, since *Resistance*'s opening hour is its worst. Its opening pair of stages – York and Grimsby – deliver a sterile game world filled with linear shootouts and scripted violence which follow an unexciting path through the action that really does feel like *Call Of Duty* phoning home. It's a feeling that's not without a worthy climax, though, since the third stage, Manchester, is where *Resistance* gets its own Hill 30 moment, a busy push through razed 1950s British streets that are rampant with both allied human troops and Chimeran enemies. And it's here that you'll likely first notice *Resistance*'s callous checkpointing. Some of these restarts points have several major skirmishes between them, and having to retread so many minutes of concerted, hard-won terrain can make you bleed enthusiasm. It's what makes the game's segmented recharging energy bar feel like a mistake, compared to *Halo*'s total-recharge shield system. The sheer number of enemies and the fantastic weapons encourage daring and dynamic gunplay, but with enemy fire able to cut you down in seconds, the tension would have been strengthened, rather than undermined, with a more forgiving shield system. And these checkpoints engender the kind of caution that only rams home the just-add-monsters set-pieces that fill the game's often cavernous environments, and can turn to true off-button frustration during the game's final stages. If you fall foul of that, then the game's length – which is around 12 hours, depending on how sticky you find the sticking points – feels like more of a slog than it should.

Still on doubter territory: the Sixaxis disappoints. While you can tame the floaty analogue sticks with a suitably tightened sensitivity setting, the down-barrel precision aiming will then feel twice as flighty,



Checkpoints, despite their spacing, offer a full health refill, and all weapons are, importantly, available at all times once you've discovered them. Crucial, since a _Halo_-style limit on firearms would have suffocated _Resistance_'s bubbly gun set









Splitscreen co-op is reliably smooth and unrestrictive; tapping left on the D-pad will set a waypoint showing the position of the other player. A team of two will be all but necessary to tackle the game on its highest difficulty



***Resistance* certainly has physics to showboat, but you're rarely prompted or able to make any application of the clutter and furniture that gets kicked around by explosions. A highlight are the racks of Chimeran energy balls, holding three makeshift grenades; detonate one, and the remainder bounce around and explode in a chain reaction**



resulting in some graceless jitters as you chase after the headshots that are necessary for effective takedowns of enemy squads. Ultimately, you can salvage some kind of comfort and skill from the control scheme – which, other than analogue precision, is well configured – but it'll never feel like mastery in a way that it does with some other console shooters.

Now for the believers: it's time for the payoff. It should come as no surprise that the studio behind *Ratchet & Clank* has realised a weapon set that reeks of both imagination and expert implementation, and feels

> It should come as no surprise that the studio behind Ratchet & Clank has realised a weapon set reeking of imagination and expert implementation

effortless with it. The Bullseye allows enemies to be tagged with a homing beacon, so that rounds can be shot around corners to seek out their target; these tags can even be placed in mid-air, surrounded with bullets, and then moved around with the placement of further tags. The Auger's ammo will go through any wall or object, however thick, and its secondary fire provides a shield that makes it the perfect solution for tackling gun emplacements; conversely, it's a weapon the Chimera will use, adding to the sensation of being hunted, where being out of sight isn't necessarily out of range. The Hailstorm is a furious extraterrestrial chain gun, but ammo is in depressing but understandable short supply, given that secondary fire deploys the remnants of your current clip as a beautiful and deadly mid-air auto-turret. The Fareye sniper rifle offers a slow-mo mode that cancels out the vulnerability of exposing yourself for scoped shooting, offering pinpoint accuracy otherwise beyond the reach of the PS3's sticks. Even its rocket launcher features an air brake function – deploying secondary mini-missiles while paused in the air – to be redirected in whichever direction you point your reticule. The dreary mine-laying Sapper is the only low point, especially since you've already got an emperor's buffet of ambush tools at your disposal. Even grenades don't escape this military Midas touch: all three types are just as joyous, from the feathered, napalm-like flames of Air Fuel grenades, to the spherical shrapnel of Hedgehog grenades; even the traditional frags leave your hand with a crisp and menacing sizzle. And there's more: complete the game, and a second playthrough unearths some equally ingenious bonus weapons, including the vicious lock-on headshot machines that are the Reaper twin pistols, or the Backlash grenades whose function we won't spoil, among many others.

It may seem indulgent to spend several hundred words on all this pump-action pornography, but such excess is due; if nothing else, they succeed in resuscitating the tension of corridor-based shooting more than most FPSs have managed. But none of that imagination would count if it weren't

CONTINUED >

On-rails track



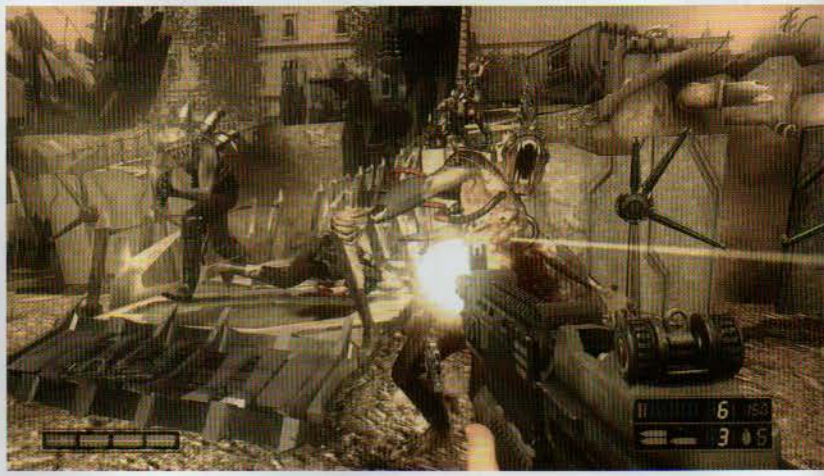
Three different vehicles crop up throughout the solo campaign: a tank, a Chimeran Walker unit and a jeep. Sections involving the first two are heavily scripted and limited, leading to some heavyweight but ultimately hollow blasting, but the jeep's lone section is a highlight. Staged in the Cheddar Gorge and accompanied by a soldier firing the minigun strapped to the back of the vehicle, you're tasked with cleaning out several Chimeran checkpoints, using the switches within to unlock the gates that allow you to progress. It's here that you get a glimpse of *Halo's* more organic battle-blended vehicle sections, as you perform hit 'n' run drive-bys or park the jeep in a useful spot while you leave it and flank as you see fit, and more of such flexible encounters would have been very welcome.





Part of the story's limpness comes from unceremonious level endings where, often suddenly and unexpectedly, the screen fades before delivering you to the next area, often with little clue as to how exactly you arrived there







Apart from the Menials (above), one other standout enemy is the Gray Jack, a spindly, lumbering walker, whose insect-like speed is unnerving both up-close or from a distance. Taking one out before it reaches melee range is a tense moment

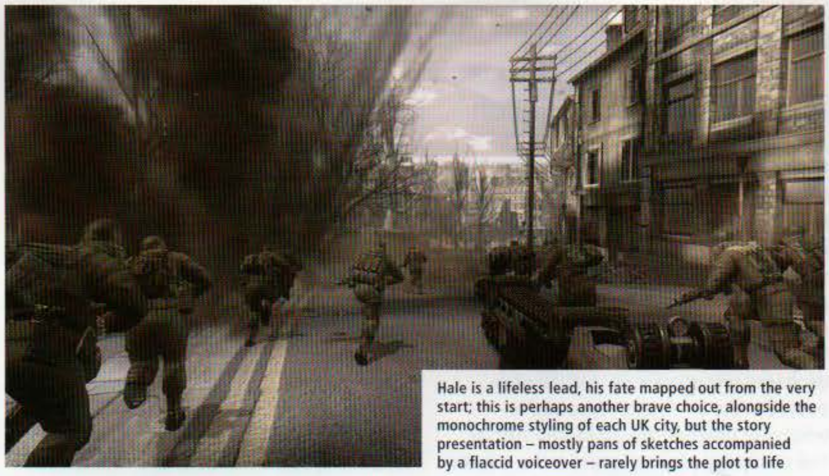
Fall of many



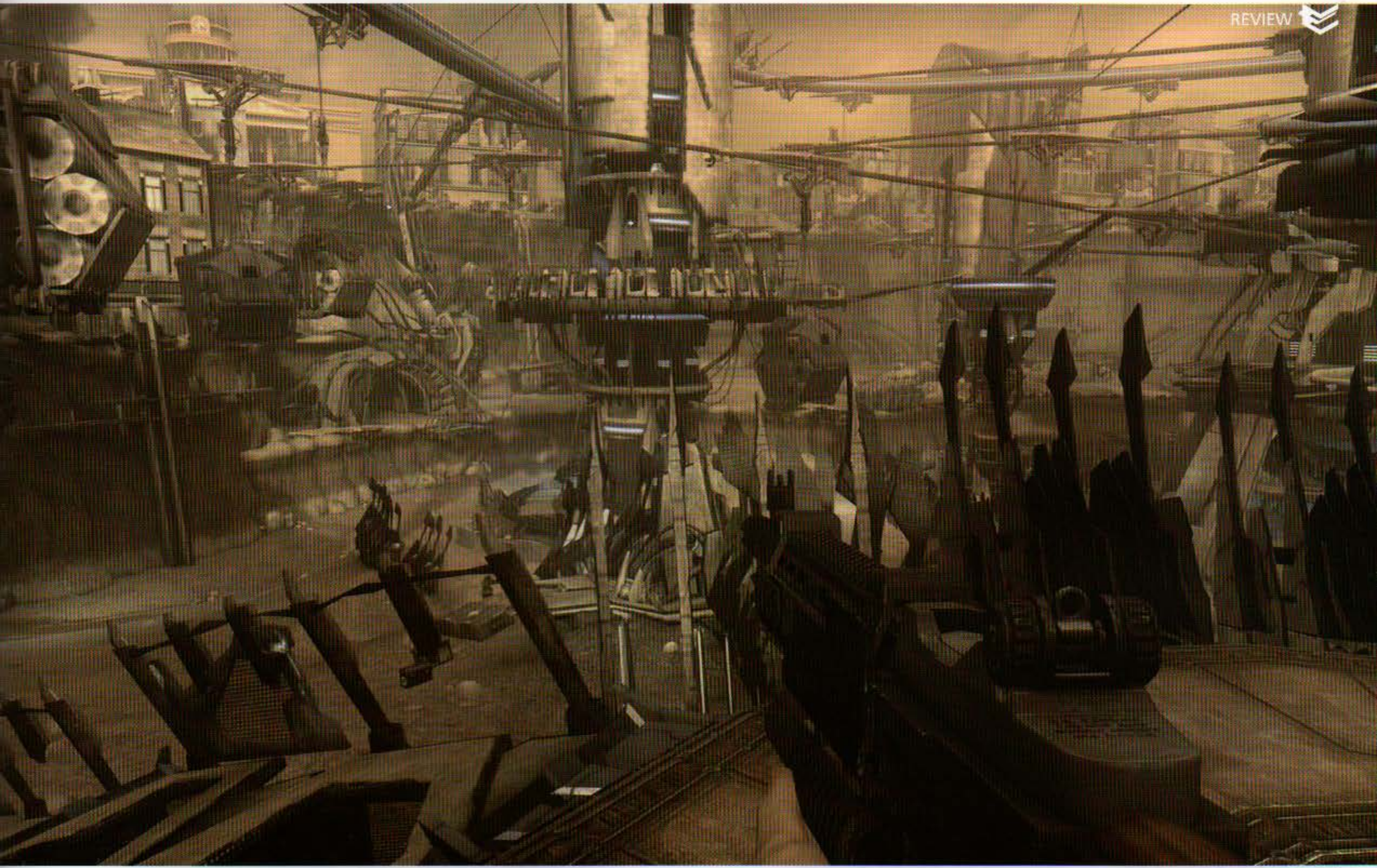
Unlike *Perfect Dark Zero*, *Resistance* has stuck firm to its grand multiplayer promise, offering 40 players the chance to engage one another in a collection of recognisable team and all-for-one versus modes. Two new weapons are added to your armoury – a flamethrower and arc beam – which prove to be the least gratifying of them all, while the absence of vehicles is offset by the fact that the enormous arenas on offer are so full with multi-tiered walkways and interiors to exploit that they just wouldn't sit well with the level design. Ranked games take too long to complete their search (something that'll hopefully be solved with updates) but there's another issue that can exhaust – since player headsets aren't as standard a feature as they are for Xbox Live users, current Team matches can easily feel devoid of strategy, leaving you to pile into the natural chokepoints where most players gather. The firefights are always intense, but to wring anything but short-term run 'n' gun fun out of it, you're simply going to have to make the effort to form or join a clan.

for *Resistance*'s slickness, which is far from apparent until the combat starts to warm up. But when firefights are in full flow, it's an unconstrained spectacle that throws huge quantities of ordnance around – every bullet, traced out as it flies, across a backdrop of some lengthy draw distances; technically, it rarely feels like it's even breaking sweat. That prowess doesn't sit completely flush with the game's style, though – the idea of having each city themed by a monochrome colour scheme is brave, but can feel bland to the point of laziness. But there is vivid colour, in bursts, courtesy of Chimeran technology – the laser palette of their weapons and the otherworldly technology of their installations that are scattered throughout the game, include some beautifully honeycombed glass Nearly the entirety of the game's final stretch takes place on purely Chimeran turf, and gives the game a much truer sense of scale and detail as well, perhaps, as a debt to *Half-Life 2*. And despite the paucity of genuinely memorable set-pieces, there are numerous times when style and substance combine: the Walker factory jutting out of Cheddar Gorge, for example, is where the choice to blend cold tech with soft English landscapes is most effective. Other notable moments include shootouts in an abandoned medical ward that stem from successful surprise attacks from the Chimera, the numerous areas when you're smothered with slow-moving but unnerving Menials (who carry no weapons but have a fearsome pounce attack), and an atmospheric trawl through a human command post in Bristol.

And, to cap off *Resistance*'s insistence on getting better as you play – as you adjust to its pacing, and learn to apply each weapon dropped into your hands – its second playthrough comes much closer to brilliance. With hindsight driving you at speed through



Hale is a lifeless lead, his fate mapped out from the very start; this is perhaps another brave choice, alongside the monochrome styling of each UK city, but the story presentation – mostly pans of sketches accompanied by a flaccid voiceover – rarely brings the plot to life



each confrontation, and with the addition of its generally excellent bonus weapons – this is where it all comes together cogently, compressed into the radiant FPS that's tucked away within *Resistance* but sometimes difficult to extract. A second playthrough is hardly a bearable ask, of course, for those frustrated by their first, but it serves to show the immense potential of what could have been if the game had been realised with tighter pacing and set-piece design.

Multiplayer – so crucial a benchmark for Sony's new console – suffers the same mixed implementation. It's solid and enjoyable, with weapons and map design carrying over well from the main game (see 'Fall of many'). But it simply isn't as measured and focused an experience as more established console FPSes, and the frustrations of the sticks as well as limitations of the PS3 online environment undermine it further.

As a launch title, *Resistance* proves itself to be a crisp and powerful piece of software, but not quite as robust a videogame; it's not far off how the *Ratchet & Clank* games would feel if they were deprived of their RPG upgrade systems, plentiful collectibles and compact, colourful worlds. To enjoy it throughout is a tightrope walk that few will fail to stray from, and one that demands you love its guns as much as it does. Which puts us back in the land of the fanboy: approaching a game with preconceived conviction can be a risky business, amplifying the bad or the good as you've already seen fit to judge. With *Resistance*, a better preparation is a good set of blinkers and a little store of faith. **[7]**



The scuttling Leaper swarms require little or no strategy outside of walking backwards while firing, but even so they do manage the odd striking moment, such as when they spill into a canteen and start upsetting the tables and chairs in their straight-line scamper towards you

A second playthrough shows the potential of what could have been if the game had been realised with tighter pacing and set-piece design





Resistance's choice to offer destroyed Blighty next to _Gears Of War_'s 'destroyed beauty' seems a superior decision but with less impressive realisation. Somerset is one of the better locales, and while recognisable London landmarks also appear in later stages, we're not sure about them being on the city's 'outskirts'





WarioWare has always plundered Nintendo's vaults, but *Smooth Moves* excels, aping *Nintendogs*, *Animal Crossing* and even an *F-Zero* track, no Virtual Console required



WARIOWARE: SMOOTH MOVES

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), JANUARY 27 (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS PREVIOUSLY IN: E169

Calorie counter



When you complete the main game, a series is unlocked, which brings *Smooth Moves'* most strenuous microgames together, including the punishing squats. It's one of the most explicit, if not exactly serious, demonstrations of Wii being a game console that can help fitness rather than combat it. While it's hardly a balanced workout, it does raise the pulse. A more convincing avenue for future development is the rhythm-action boss stage that maps dance moves to the remote, ending, exhilaratingly, with a Saturday Night Fever finger-point.

After a faltering start on DS with *WarioWare Touched!*, Intelligent Systems has taken Nintendo's baton and run with it, strip-mining the capabilities and possibilities of the Wii remote with intimidating speed and confidence. *Smooth Moves'* disposable microgames were always going to be the perfect environment for experimentation, but it's still humbling to see how much ground has been covered. Some games are so sensitive that they react to the tiniest quiver in your hand, while others ask for extravagant, violent movements – the first designs to use the pointer and tilt controls simultaneously. The collection of grips, motions and concepts is so complete that Intelligent Systems has already moved on and taken a step back from the controller – and asked you to do the same – with games that ask you to drop it (wriststrap definitely advised) or place it face down on a table. The freedom of movement and thought is absolutely intoxicating.

You need to be intoxicated because *Smooth Moves* requires considerable suspension of inhibition: it's easy to cheat your way through many games by holding instead of balancing, shaking instead of hula-ing. It's testament to its infectious absurdity that you seldom will, even when exhausted and alone. There are misfires – sometimes you can't figure out exactly what you're meant to do or why what you're doing isn't working – and the constant grip changes take their toll on *WarioWare's* immediacy. But in the end these are small prices to pay for the breathless, slapstick barrage, and the constant and immediate reward of new ways to use your new toy.

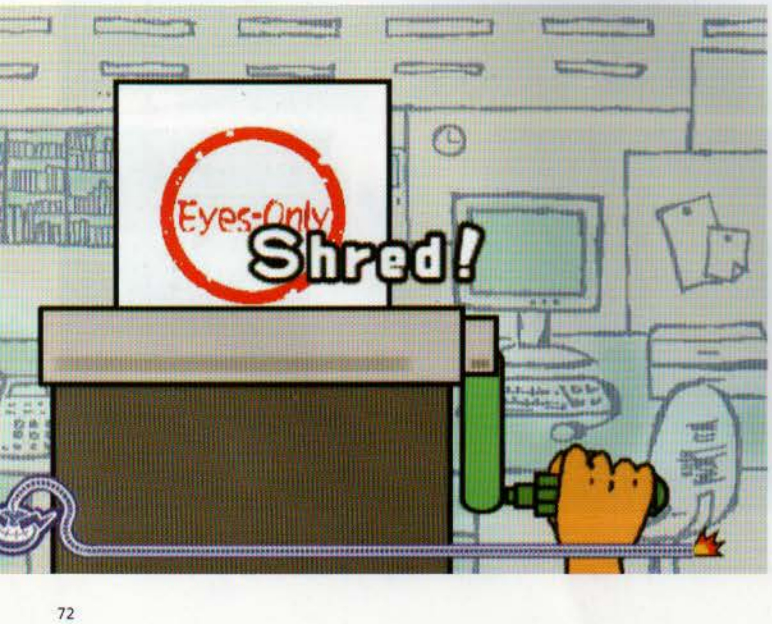
Smooth Moves is at its best in the traditional singleplayer (though not necessarily alone), where you can enjoy the rampant, accelerating surrealism of the games and cut-scenes, collect new games through replays, and compete with other profiles for high scores. The multiplayer element is restricted to passing a single controller around for one-off microgames, which is a thrifty and sociable solution. If you have the numbers (game styles support five to twelve players), this is excellent, but the framing mechanics aren't always well-paced enough to keep the momentum up. The version of darts tucked away as an unlockable minigame is something of an after-hours classic that can hold its own against any of the Wii Sports.

Above all, it's funny. Despite its status as poster-child for the Wii Remote, *Smooth Moves* hasn't smoothed over *WarioWare's* extreme absurdism. If anything, this is the most bizarre game in the series to date. Nintendo's bad boy has come good again for its new console, but that doesn't mean he's going to behave himself. And once you get your hands on this free-standing, free-associating riot, neither are you. **[8]**



The game tutors you in the variety of Remote manipulations required, each with its own name (The Big Cheese, The Sketch Artist, The Pestle And Mortar, The Thumb Wrestler, etc). While the game can't check whether or not you have the controller clamped to your hip while you hula, your audience – or some innate sense of gaming integrity – will likely keep you honest







***Smooth Moves* makes a mockery of, well, almost everything, but in particular the debate over the Wii's graphical abilities. The game continues *WarioWare's* gleeful disregard for any kind of aesthetic standard, revelling in ugliness, contrast, primitivism and ironic naïvety, if such a thing is possible**



While hardly a visual showcase for the Wii, *Excite Truck*'s clean lines do bring with them some smart and understated effects. Transparent smoke, reflective water and, of course, the smooth deformation of landscapes conspire to create a competent, and occasionally impressive-looking, title



Along with the terrain-deformation icons, retro-themed POW tokens offer you invincibility and improved speed. These are best used for an off-road Super Tree Run, where you can then mow down flora without a worry, or for a five-star Super Truck Smash



EXCITE TRUCK

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 30
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: MONSTER GAMES INC PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

As one of the first driving games available for the Wii (along with Ubisoft's *GT Pro Series*), *Excite Truck* raises the question of whether the Wii Remote can offer the level of control now expected of a driving game. The answer is an unqualified yes. Although the lack of an analogue stick is initially unsettling, after a period of adjustment tilting the Remote up and down is as responsive an alternative as you could hope for. Indeed, the versatility of the Remote is amply demonstrated by placing it in the natty steering wheel that comes bundled with *GT Pro Series*, although it works equally well without.

The game itself, however, is more problematic. As if to confirm that developers have yet to exploit the graphical power of the Wii, *Excite Truck* has the appearance of a middling GameCube title; it is sharp, crisp and colourful, but can hardly be described as impressive. Nevertheless, the game manages a solid 30 frames per second, and the breathtaking vehicle speed on offer – which brings to mind titles such as *Burnout* – does much to alleviate any visual concerns.

Success is not just about winning; each course requires a number of stars to be collected (although final placement brings with it a star bonus). These can be picked up through activities as diverse as drifting, colliding with the opposition, hurtling unscathed through the treeline and catching air, achieved by boosting off jumps, as in *Excitebike 64* – an activity that goes hand-in-hand with terrain deformation. Hit an icon and the environment shifts, with the bonus of perhaps throwing opponents into the air, which scores more stars. It's a fine system, and the controls are responsive and precise enough to cope with winning races and employing the various methods of star-earning at your disposal. Central to all of this is a boost facility almost identical to *MotorStorm*'s – the only cap to boosting is your overheating engine (and water cools it down immediately, making for inviting off-course dashes into rivers).

However, despite some intriguing mechanics, this is a tissue-thin wisp of a game, perfect for satisfying quick-fix thrill-rides but lacking in long-term appeal. The main championships can be seen off in an afternoon, and the perfunctory two-player support and bonus challenges don't add much meat to the bone. Lifespan issues aside, though, *Excite Truck* is, at its core, a satisfying and individual racer.

It's tempting to see *Excite Truck* as a great idea hamstrung by the deadline of the Wii launch. Whether that's true or not, it's hugely entertaining while it lasts, and if a sequel arrives we can only hope that the sterling race mechanics are welded to a more substantial and rewarding game. **[6]**





It's tempting to see the *Excite* name as an attempt to bracket this game under a minor Nintendo series umbrella. However, those approaching the game because of the goodwill generated by the excellent *Excitebike 64* will find *Excite Truck*, while entertaining, anorexic in comparison



One of the most frustrating elements of playing *Excite Truck* is trying to spin in mid-air (which scores you more stars, naturally). Holding down the 2 button and waggling the remote offers unpredictably variable results. While the controls are exemplary elsewhere, they seem annoyingly inconsistent in this particular instance

Rock and a hard place



The music in *Excite Truck* is certainly an acquired taste. While not without charm, the repetitive and often leaden rock begins to pall quickly. However, *Excite Truck* is the first game on the Wii to support custom soundtracks – simply pop in an SD card filled with your own MP3s and the music of your choice can supplant the game's. Hardly a surprise to those who own more multimedia-centric consoles, perhaps, this nonetheless seems emblematic of the more inclusive Nintendo that first emerged with the release of the DS.



GENJI: DAYS OF THE BLADE

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: $60 (£32) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MARCH 2007 (UK) PUBLISHER: SONY DEVELOPER: GAME REPUBLIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



In the first *Genji*, there were two ways to unearth the hidden power-up gems – the pad would rumble, or the character's hip pouch would glow as they neared it. The lack of rumble isn't much of an issue here, especially sin the closer camera views make the glow harder to miss

Four thought



Two new characters – priestess Shizuka and war god Lord Buson – join Yoshistune and Benkei, seemingly designed to offer a playing style between the polar opposites of agility and brawn that *Genji*'s original pair represent. Buson wields a double sabre (and manifests in the body of Kagekiyo, the first game's final boss), while Shizuka carries chained blades and is the biggest letdown of the two – her nimble body never quite as athletic as you'd expect. Her weapons lash to objects to let you cross gaps, pull certain enemies towards her or herself towards them, but her staccato, sweeping attacks feeling too dulled to provide something as pleasing as Yoshitsune's whip-crack strikes or Benkei's excessive brutality, or cope with the demands of combat as seen through the eyes of the camera.

Massive damage. Giant enemy crabs. Realtime weapon change. The wave of internet in-jokes that followed on from Sony's awkward 2006 E3 conference felt at times particularly cruel, with the bulk of them aimed at this sequel to one of the most delicate and hospitable sword-action titles on the PS2. But it's hard to maintain an affronted stance against such cyber-mockery, not when *Days Of The Blade* is so lacking in the sparkle and accessibility of the original.

It still has plenty of flourish and showy beauty about its period samurai-fantasy style; its forests, rivers and temples are handsomely hazy and weapons are expertly crafted, as are the outfits worn by the game's characters – even if those stood in them appear as waxy mannequins, an affliction that, thankfully, doesn't spread to the lavish CG cutscenes. The fixed camera is more intimate than before and rarely ventures above head height – and often obstructively so. The battlefields flock with enemies, meaning that the careful, crisp countering aspect of the original is all but off the menu; it's an approach that results in more impressive scenes, but is messy with it, prickling you with plenty of unseen attacks. The Kamui mode is now completely different, and no longer acts as teaching tool for counterattacks; instead of placing you in a slow-mo astral plane where button prompts allow you to dodge, parry and fatally counter, it throws you at each foe in turn with a flurry of blows executed by following button-press patterns. Some of the longer combos are capable of building into something gratifying, but the system now feels completely detached, however eye-catching its backdrop.



Also new are the character and weapon swaps, the latter giving you the option of two, the former allows instant switching between all four protagonists (see 'Four thought'). Weapon switching isn't as flexible or deft as that of *Devil May Cry 3*, but it does add more function, if not grace, to attack strings, and character substitution is aided by the split-second of breathing space given upon swapping. Outside of this, however, characters – with the exception of Yoshitsune, the face of *Genji*, who's still capable of dazzling – are difficult to use in a satisfying manner. Patience is needed to tease out their strengths, which can feel frustrating on such a crowded canvas. It's certainly got strong production in its favour, but needs better direction – what's been gained in grunt and intensity has been lost i terms of poise and refinement, resulting in an uncomfortable middle ground between truly outrageous action and the disciplined choreography of the original. [5



The tilt sensor can be used as an alternative to the right stick. While it's a fine concept, it's ill fitting and awkwar enough as to make it feel like an obligatory gesture



A busy battle offers a novel break from room-to-room slash-outs, but these moments, as with many other points, provide little clue about what to do next







RIDGE RACER 7

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: $60 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MARCH (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E169

And, like a talisman – PlayStation's own red sky at night – *Ridge Racer* dutifully appears alongside PS3, a right hand man alongside the first-party retainers. But as much as it feels like part of the family, the black sheep of the clan – *Ridge Racer 6* on 360 – has already served up the bulk of what *RR7* is offering, on the track at least.

Away from the familiar drift-racing core, though, it's time for a remix: career mode has been shuffled up, moving it away from *RR6*'s rigid World Xplorer map, and breaking up races into GPs, manufacturer trials and special events (which also include some time trials; more of these would have been welcome). This means that you'll be able to dabble with a variety of machine classes more quickly than in *RR6*, but the trek to the top – where the special vehicles come out to play – is just as lengthy. Returning tracks have been topped with some extra trackside details, but they'll be best appreciated by those who've played enough *RR6* to not need to be here. The few new courses include variants of *RR6*'s pseudo-ancient jungle stage, whose highlight is a quick stretch of wet road through a cavern and behind a waterfall, but in terms of layout there's nothing as noteworthy as the corkscrew curves and ridiculous jumps to be found in Rave City.

Customisation is now a significant, allowing for the new parts, in both cosmetic and performance categories, to be earned, purchased and installed. Nitrous, for example, has now evolved from the one-type-fits-all concept of *RR6* to include a variety of modes across different classes – continual recharge, for example, or a more flexible type that uses up only the requested amount – along with other parts earned through progress or by collecting prestige points from a manufacturer by winning with their vehicles. It means that easier victories can now be bought, removing the knife-edge demand of bettering your performances by slicing milliseconds off each bend, that led to so much of the satisfaction gained from *RR6*'s upper tier challenges; without that restriction now in place, there's a risk of it feeling less like *Ridge Racer*, and more like a traditional garage-based racer.

The heart-stopping victories and the coronary-inducing failures are still there to be had, but it needs to move away from such a dependence on boosting, and return the emphasis back to scalpel-keen drift lines without the need to invest hours working through torpid beginner events or, now, chasing upgrades. After four games in two years, that have basically been two games – *Ridge Racers 1* & *2*, and *RR6* & *7* remaining close-knit pairs (or even one game, in the eyes of some) – it now feels in need of a shake up to make it bounce back instead of producing yet another diminished return. **[6]**



Lose some nitrous and the surge of acceleration shatters the visuals around the screen's edge – a cheap-looking effect. It's uniquely stunning, however, when applied to the grids of skyscraper lights in Rave City's background







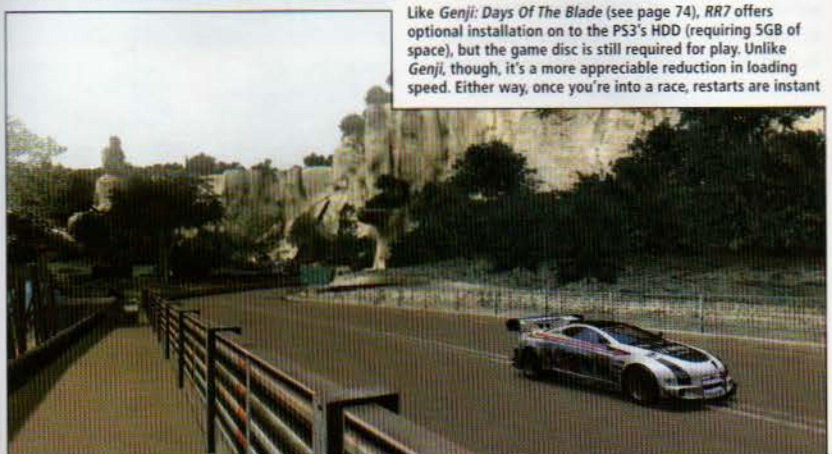
A slipstream function – denoted by a pulsing bar under the nitro meter – is a rather standard addition for such an ostentatious racer. It does help to push you to first place, but the subsequent tussle for the top spot is unchanged, as are races that, ultimately, come down to who can make best use of nitrous during the closing bends of the final lap



***Ridge Racer 7*'s frontend is one of the least successful in the series. The music still builds as you delve into the menus – a signature touch – but it's so crammed with options that the use of colour and icons feels less like graphic design and more like videogame graphics**



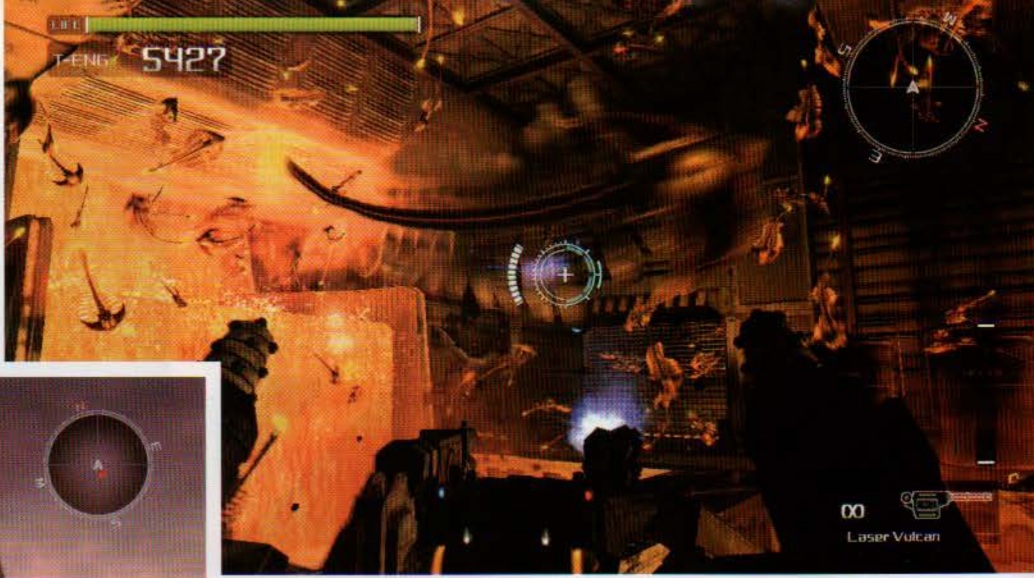
Like *Genji: Days Of The Blade* (see page 74), *RR7* offers optional installation on to the PS3's HDD (requiring 5GB of space), but the game disc is still required for play. Unlike *Genji*, though, it's a more appreciable reduction in loading speed. Either way, once you're into a race, restarts are instant



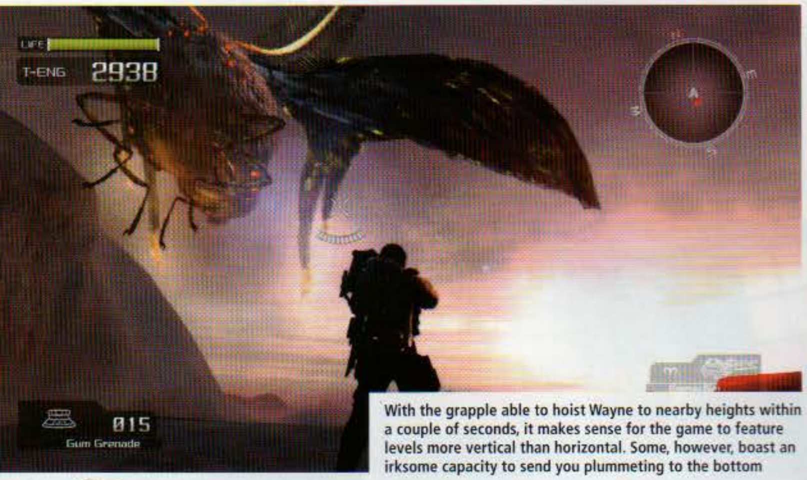
Two human



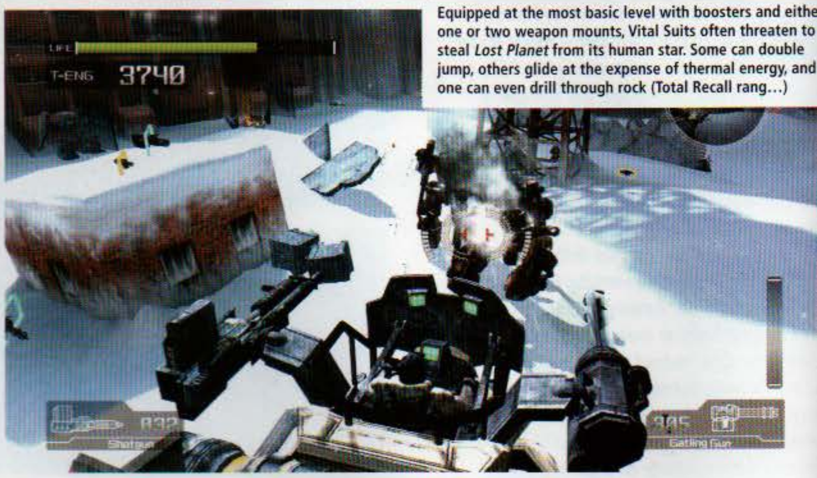
Online play is *Ridge Racer 7*'s most successful advance over *RR6*, allowing 14 players to take part in a generic race, or stake ranking while they're at it (and a, wait for it, Rich Racer ranking tracks a leaderboard of the players in rudest financial health, alongside the expected global time trial mode). Team Racing is welcome, but there's more: Pair Racing. Players split into teams of two, with the obvious benefit of teamwork slipstreaming, while a Team Drift allows them to reap extra nitrous if they powerslide around a corner in unison. And if this isn't enough to convince you to get coupled, a similar mode is available for time trial, too.



James Cameron's fondness for juxtaposing different colour temperatures is another of *Lost Planet's* steals, the game descending into a volcanic dome as it passes the halfway mark. With so much magma flying about, however, the whole thermal energy device becomes a mite incredible



With the grapple able to hoist Wayne to nearby heights within a couple of seconds, it makes sense for the game to feature levels more vertical than horizontal. Some, however, boast an irksome capacity to send you plummeting to the bottom



Equipped at the most basic level with boosters and eithe one or two weapon mounts, Vital Suits often threaten to steal *Lost Planet* from its human star. Some can double jump, others glide at the expense of thermal energy, and one can even drill through rock (Total Recall rang...)



LOST PLANET: EXTREME CONDITION

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: JANUARY 12
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E163, E164, E170

Cooler kings



Without the staple Capcom ingredient of earth-shattering, screen-consuming boss battles, *Lost Planet's* singleplayer mode would barely warrant the effort. There are many, however, and so it does. Weak spots, massive damage, and escalating attack routines remain the publisher's A, B and C, with each of the Akrid goliaths inviting you to aim at their highlighted joints or abscesses and jam the trigger. The game's physics system integrates particularly well into Capcom's existing method, the great sweeps of the creatures' limbs bashing rather than clipping through your VS. Regrettably, though, the humanoid encounters are less absorbing, allowing attention to wander to the perennial flaws of the boss battle. Some can be unfair, others simply mechanical, and the climactic showdown is particularly scrappy.

Like a naked flame tossed into a world of dynamite, *Lost Planet's* Wayne Holden (who bears the likeness of South Korean superstar Lee Byung Hun) is an action superstar, the kind of man who learned to dive before he could walk. Better than the weapons he salvages and steals, and arguably even better than the ground-shaking Vital Suits he commands, is the physicality of the man himself. When he falls (which incidentally does him no harm), he stumbles; when the heat of battle rushes past him, he cowers; when he turns to cover a flanking enemy, his feet stay rooted in position as his torso pivots. Most importantly, when he throws himself through a wall of flame to dodge an exploding missile, he seems immortal.

As an unpretentious action movie mélange, Inafune's ode to moviemakers James Cameron and Paul Verhoeven is frequently phenomenal. Though its cinematography is less dashing and its action cool and clean, it better represents them and their craft than Epic's *Gears Of War*. That doesn't make it the better game, but plugged into a 5.1 setup and an HDTV it'll blow you several inches farther out of your seat. Coupling the heaviest of artillery with a feather-light touch, it knows the optimum values of momentum, scale and weight, and how best to send them through the roof.

As a package, however, it's unbalanced. Bearing all the hallmarks of a multiplayer game drafted into singleplayer service, its level design does little more than toss man and beast into urban and industrial corridors and hangars, letting bog standard AI do the rest. Its story, in which Wayne somehow manages to adopt every Arnold Schwarzenegger role at the same time, develops in such an isolated capacity that it needn't be there at all. Really, this is a game of strong, simple virtues: knockout action, beautiful character design, lovingly articulated models, crisp sound and overall polish. Every now and then it'll overstretch, at which point it falls.

Its thermal energy mechanic, by which health is replenished from your ever-vanishing store until its depletion freezes you to death, complements the game's pace and its survivalist premise, but sacrifices any sense of precisely how alive you are. Likewise, a complex physics system creates great exchanges of impact and resistance between Vital Suits and the invading Akrid, but often sees opponents repeatedly, frustratingly batter you as you struggle to your feet.

Online, however, in a quartet of rudimentary gametypes, the pieces slot together with reduced friction. Shooting a missile in midair suddenly provides its reward, the *Bionic Commando*-style grapple demonstrates its true tactical value (as do the eight maps), and the stubborn resistance of enemies to machine gun fire – a cheap way to simulate strength that *Gears* also employed – at least feels sensible. Those without the means should consider themselves warned, then, that solo *Lost Planet* can often feel like a practice session (or maybe a Tupperware party of mass destruction) rather than the real deal. **[7**





Fans of Commando will probably faint when they see the game's finished death animations – exaggerated flails of torso and limbs, bullets firing into the sky as the head roars with what seems like objection rather than pain



Untamed piñata appear in monochrome (below), which suits some of them better than their 'real' day-glo plumage. Even at its fullest extent (left), your garden is hardly huge, but the game encourages you to cultivate multiple areas, letting you share money and items across all your plots of land



VIVA PIÑATA

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS DEVELOPER: RARE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E162, E167

The most common question that's asked about *Viva Piñata* is straightforward: what do you *do*? If it's just a case of luring living piñata to a garden so you can watch them play, doesn't that make it more a screensaver than a videogame? In reality, however, as the game reveals its subtleties and considerable charm, the much more revealing question is 'what do you become?'

Stage one positions you as a gardener, smacking down loose earth, planning herbaceous borders, fretting over the positioning of water features and bird baths.



Once you've met each species' romance requirements, you'll still need to steer your suitor through a largely pointless minigame (above). A greater pleasure is found in the animation (below) which gives the animals life and leaves you feeling more like a digital David Attenborough



Balancing your personal tastes with the requirements of your desired piñata (this much grass, that many carrot plants, this much water) is engaging, even within the limited confines of the small plot of land you start with. Stage two turns you into a zoo-keeper. As more and more piñata move in, rivalries emerge and fights break out. If you want both a pony and a horse you can keep them fenced apart, but how are you going to manage the violent jealousies between free-flying swans and ducks? What happens if a hungry sparrow starts eyeing up your breeding pair of worms? And so your attention is taken up with births and deaths, diets and sickness. Then comes stage three: the biologist. Once you've established an equilibrium, the time comes for experimentation. What happens if you feed this seed to this chicken, set fire to this insect or lure this creature into the pond?

For a game in which nothing happens – you never leave the garden – there's a surprising complexity about the interplay between the different piñata, their breeding requirements and their potential evolutions. The limited size of the garden, which at first seems disappointing, is in fact the game's core strength: it requires strategic thinking and elegant solutions to realise your ideal menagerie. And if the progression from landscape labourer to mad professor sounds stressful and pressured, don't be misled: the lack of a realtime clock, combined with the presence of helpers (who water plants, ward off troublesome 'sour' piñata and collect and sell produce) means that there's never a need to rush. The complexities unfold at a pace perfectly calibrated for a four year old – if only more games were as considerate – and adults will be just as soothed by the continual flow of rewards and hints.

There are mundane problems, notably the poor communication of how many items (which include items placed by the player such as trees and walls, as well as piñata and NPCs who wander in and out) you can have in your garden. Also frustrating is the unpredictability of waiting for those piñata whose visit requirements you've met to actually wander in. And, of course, there's no consolation for the limits of the Live experience, which extend only to sending presents to other players, and offers no way to share your garden. At every other level, however, *Viva Piñata* is rich with charm, ingenuity, artistry and genuine delight. **[7]**





The romance dances (left) which represent each animal's mating habits are often hilarious, although with more than 60 creatures it's little wonder some feel a little perfunctory. Getting your animals in the mood can be an expensive business, but a spot of chilli-farming (right) raises ample cash for very little effort

Red in tooth and paw



One of *Viva's* great strengths is the savagery that undercuts the saccharine screenshots. It's not just that piñata foxes may eat piñata bunnies, it's that even the cutest herbivore will wander over to pick sweet morsels out of any available corpse. The clever mythology (no piñata can die – they're reincarnated outside the garden – and being smashed and harvested for sweets makes them happy, since it's the purpose they were created for) means that it won't be long before you join in, callously bludgeoning unwanted piñata to shreds. Even life is tinged with death: if Storkos is unable to deliver the egg created by mated piñata, she'll take it back home to fry up as a morning omelette.



YOSHI'S ISLAND DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ARTOON
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



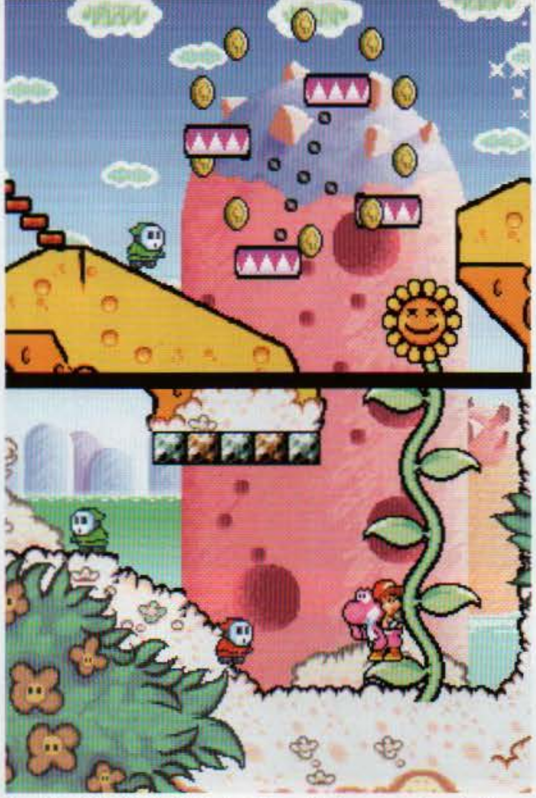
The babies' basic abilities are rather obvious – Mario's ability to turn on 'M' blocks is particularly lazy shorthand – but there are some sweeter, subtler variations: with Mario, thrown eggs rebound, but with DK they explode

If you ever wanted concrete proof of the brilliance of Nintendo's designers, then *Yoshi's Island DS* is it. And not, sadly, because the template they created for the 1995 SNES classic has proven so robust that even platform pariahs Artoon – already responsible for tipping the cute dinosaur into the muck with the disastrous *Universal Gravitation* – could make a great game with it. No, it's the other way around – a more deflating result, but perhaps a more conclusive one. Artoon has clearly been given unlimited access to the original's art and code: *Yoshi's Island DS* has exactly the same graphics, the same enemy design, the same controls, the same systems, the same joyous, chaotic elasticity. And yet, despite raw materials of such quality, it has only succeeded in producing a pale imitation of a Nintendo platform game, one that suffers badly from comparisons to the recent *New Super Mario Bros.*

It would be easy to accuse Artoon of tinkering too much with perfection, but in truth, its innovations are very few and aren't the only, or even the true, culprit here. Yes, the character-swapping feature that apportions different abilities to the babies on Yoshi's back – Mario dashes, Peach floats, Donkey Kong swings, guest stars Wario and Bowser cause contrived mischief – is hackneyed and clumsily implemented. Restricting dash to one character is criminal too, a miserly rationing of the pinwheeling momentum that has been a constant of every 2D Mario platformer since *Super Mario Bros.* But, if anything, the character-swapping puzzles are the best elements of Artoon's own design. Meanwhile, the full portrait presentation across two screens is a refreshingly simple approach to the DS's unique display that provides a generous frame for the sumptuous scribbles of the art, and gives the levels tremendous vertical reach. It's only marred by an irritating but unavoidable blind strip between the screens.

It turns out that God – or the 'Nintendo touch', at any rate – was in the details all along. Enemy and platform placement, item distribution, timing, pacing, difficulty balancing, the density and variety of events and ideas per level: it's a thousand tiny shortcomings in these areas that leave *Yoshi's Island DS* looking exactly like a classic Nintendo platformer, but feeling nothing like one. The only memorable moments are recycled from the original game, and every new addition is missing that vital extra man-hour of effort: a few pixels of shading here, a frame of animation there, a subtle disguise or hint in the layout. It takes hard, painstaking graft to make magic, and Artoon's designers just didn't have it in them. So it's left to Yoshi to carry them, as well as his tiny charges.

It's not too much for Nintendo's irrepressible creation; nothing ever is. It would be impossible to make a bad game out of the blocks that built his greatest adventure. But this workmanlike effort is far less than he deserves. **[6]**





An oddity of *Yoshi's Island DS* is that it's possible to run out of eggs for long periods, and in some cases you have to think about rationing them. The day resource management impinges on a Nintendo platform game is a sad one indeed

Best of the bestiary



The Museum is the best of the extras in *Yoshi's Island DS* – actually a zoo that houses every enemy you've hit with an egg so far. It shrewdly capitalises on the tremendous attraction of the hilarious, misbegotten monsters Yoshi meets on his travels (mostly from the original game, with some admittedly fine new additions). There are also some mildly diverting minigames (egg target practice, Shy Guy spitting, long jumping and so on) that are unlocked when you find them in levels, a time trial mode on completion, and some extra levels, the conditions for opening which are a little on the harsh side.



The exaggerated physics of Yoshi's movement and interactions with the world were an important highlight of the original – and have been preserved – but there's a sudden, detached weightlessness as soon as new addition Baby Donkey Kong (above) starts climbing and swinging on vines. Yoshi is exactly as he was in the original *Yoshi's Island*, and is therefore wholly adorable. His vocalisations and sound effects are a key part of his appeal, but many will be distressed to learn that the iconic 'pop' noise when he lays an egg has been replaced





The game takes maximum advantage of the tweezer-like grip of the remote, asking you to tease bone fragments out of a shattered arm, and neatly rotate them back into place



It may not have the hands-on 'ick' factor of the DS version, but *Second Opinion* is still gloriously gory – great entertainment for any spectators







The plot is heaped with romance, terrorism, long-lost friends, tragic deaths and a staggeringly idiosyncratic approach to the laws of science. You'll need to dissolve, rather than suspend, your disbelief



TRAUMA CENTER: SECOND OPINION

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: $50 (US), £40 (UK)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JANUARY (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

The DS had to wait nearly a year for titles with the flair and sophistication of *Trauma Center* to emerge – months of waiting while developers mastered its strange abilities and divined a new approach to game design. The Wii (in the US at least) seems to have them at launch.

Which is good news, surely? Not quite. There's no doubt that *Second Opinion* is a credible translation of *Trauma Center's* touchscreen charms: the Remote replaces your stylus, with the Nunchuk stick allowing quick selection of surgical tools. Each operation requires you to slice open your patient, treat his wounds and diseases, then close up before the time runs out or his heart flatlines. Each operation remains a satisfying test of nerve, requiring a steady hand and a clear head to prioritise and put into practice the necessary procedures. But the Remote doesn't deliver the same sense of connection that the stylus did – there's nothing to match the visceral revulsion of actually having to touch seething liver pustules or tumorous buboes. And, despite the Remote's precision, the new control scheme isn't an improvement. Selecting each tool with the Nunchuk is certainly quick, but it's enormously frustrating that there isn't the option of simply selecting each icon with the Remote cursor. Worse are the little inconsistencies in the interface – it can require either a press of A, or a pinch of A and B to pick things up from your nurse's supply tray – which throws off your sense of dextrous expertise. Movement-sensing, rather than pointer-based, actions seem particularly dicey: it takes a good bit of practise to settle on the movement which detects defibrillator paddles or bomb-disposal tweezers (*Second Opinion* shares the first game's tastes for extra-curricular surgical work) being lowered and raised, and the manoeuvre never feels reliable.

More disappointing is the fact that many of the frustrations of the first game haven't been smoothed, such as the unpredictable difficulty curve or the seemingly arbitrary nature of the grades and ranks awarded. Sloppy stitching is rewarded with a 'Cool!' and fast, accurate operations with a lacklustre 'C' rank.

But the biggest frustration is that, despite seeming a perfect fit, *Trauma Center* isn't as rewarding an experience on Wii as on DS. Part of that is because of the lack of novelty: the first game's blend of manga hyperbole and gruesome tension was a real breath of fresh air, whereas this is every bit the sequel. But perhaps more important is an early key lesson: despite superficial similarities, it may be unwise to try to duplicate DS successes on its house-bound cousin. While the DS suffered in those early months from ill-advised conversions of 3D-based games, the Wii may yet be the worse for a rash of well-intentioned DS ports which don't quite hit the mark. After all, why should it take any less time to bed in than its equally radical predecessor? In the meantime, it will fall to engaging, absorbing attempts like *Second Opinion* to keep the Wii's shelves stocked. **[6]**





If a patient flatlines, you'll need to hold both Remote and Nunchuck horizontally, and lower them on to the chest to activate the defibrillator. It's a marvellous idea, but in practice rather unreliable, especially for novice Wii-ers

Laid to rest



Second Opinion**'s plot is as rich with sci-fi nonsense and cod conspiracies as the first game would have you expect. A rather darker tone comes from the game's rather strident take on euthanasia. Despite an attempt to engage with the complex issue, Dr Derek's simplistic pro-life, pro-intervention attitude may well stick in the throat of those who'd want to see such a sensitive issue handled with a bit more subtlety. Others, though, will be thrilled to see gaming at least making the effort to address such a serious concern.**



Enemies come from some Frankenstein randomiser and spawn in mostly predictable mobs whose characteristics persist across each planet, as well as back to *PSO* itself



PSU on 360 has proven perfectly convivial and jerk-free during our time online; headset-only groups can still be needlessly intimidating, but anyone after keyboard-only speech-bubble communication can find plenty of players





Most of *PSU* takes place across three planets – the green Parum, autumnal-oriental Neudiaz and arid, cave-ridden Maotoob – with Neudiaz remaining as standout as it sounds, the perfect home to the wild colour schemes









The story mode (above, middle) introduces some onerous tasks in an attempt to break up the combat. But your objectives – such as finding invisible trigger points using a set of goggles in firstperson – feel more like obstacles



PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED) PC, PS2
PRICE: £45 (360) £30 (PC, PS2) (PLUS MONTHLY SUB) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM PREVIOUSLY IN: E150, E168, E169

Any outsider looking in on the MMORPG scene will have almost always have some choice remarks to trot out about its more formulaic aspects – oh, them Orcs, them axes with the daft name +20, and so forth – but *Phantasy Star Universe* is completely cliché-proof. For the beginner, it's bewildering. Hardly anything makes sense – swords seem named after wrestling moves, special attacks perhaps named after speciality imported chocolate bars – and the on-screen icons accompanying it all take effort to fully decode, a taxonomic tax on its accessibility. But there's another aspect to that idiosyncratic identity: like *PSO*, *PSU* is glaringly glorious with colour, even if its visual design doesn't always make best use of it, each lighting effect has its volume turned up to maximum, its splashes of neon always animated in some way or other. It's one of the most incoherently pretty games around (ditto the soundtrack), even if the level of detail points to little more than an upscaled PS2 title.

Any obstruction to new players is doubly a shame, since *PSU* remains an attempt to marry the online RPG with the more instant combat mechanics of thirdperson action games. *PSO*'s rat-tat-tat combos, played out with futuristic shotguns and blades, are still here, more flamboyant than before but still stuttered in use. Before, strong and standard attack strings were offered, the former now replaced by Photon Arts, special moves of limited usage that provide great power and handsomely excessive weapon-trail flourishes. And this is *PSU*'s crowning moment as a social multiplayer experience – when a full roster of six players ventures out into an instance, they can come together in a blinding show of attack power and brute-force combat camaraderie, with little prep required.

Away from that, however, things now feel old and somewhat awkward; despite a larger game world and more room for tinkering with item synthesis and weapon upgrades, *World Of WarCraft* vets will be left mystified or even appalled at the paucity of content. Which is maybe the point, but for a game that trades a competitive level of complexity for more instant action-based appeal, it needs to be slicker in its presentation and explanations. And it's turned *PSO* on its head in one vital regard – the personality of the environments. There are more areas to explore, but that attentive architectural detail that made almost every room of *PSO*'s stages feel unique and affecting has now gone, leaving more themes but a diminished sense of place, a dangerous approach given how often each stage needs to be repeated in order to progress. And it exposes the identikit nature of those creatures that spawn in each area, too, and the absence of any narrative. A worthy amount of the old magic is still there, of course – find the right people, and it's an MMO experience like few others – but you'll have to really squint to see it. **[6]**

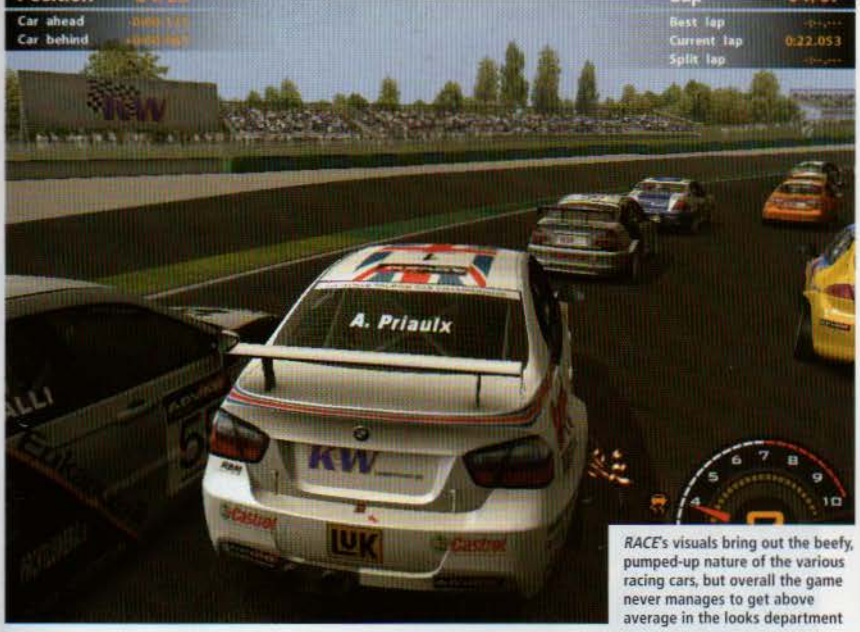


Four classes are available – balanced Humans, magical Newmans, gun-specialist Casts and melee-dedicated Beasts, the latter two unlocking exclusive special attacks when they reach level 20. Dual-wielding is also allowed, but in a limited manner that's of most help to Newmans

PSYou



Wedging a dedicated online multiplayer experience into a solo story mode may seem like an irrelevant task, but Sonic Team has plunged a credible amount of effort into the offline offering in *PSU*, even if the result isn't a proportionate payoff. It's rendered with some irksome voice-acting and characters, and the myriad cutscenes vary from the cheap to the slick. Exp requirements and enemy levels are tailored to remove the bulk of the grind, while the system even goes as far as to feature rare drops and AI buddies; they're dim, slow to act and rarely capable of freelancing, but they do perform the vital function of occupying the attentions of enemies. Trouble is, when chapter four of the story is completed, Extra Mode is unlocked – offering all four of the game's character classes, minus the story, but with the dull mission tasks still in place – and any enjoyment to be had from the extra freedom is likely to have been undercut by your enthusiasm for offline play having already dwindled.



RACE's visuals bring out the beefy, pumped-up nature of the various racing cars, but overall the game never manages to get above average in the looks department



Without malicious player intent, big collisions are rare, but impact is crunchy enough – and sufficiently damaging – to promote a more cautious attitude



RACE: THE OFFICIAL WTCC GAME

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: SIMBIN

RACE is Simbin's fourth none-more-pedantic racing simulator, slipstreaming the developer's previous cult triumphs with *GT Legends*, *GTR* and *GTR2*. Here, the vehicular focus is on the World Touring Car Championship. To that end, *RACE* sports a fully licensed ten-circuit championship calendar and all car and driver profiles from the 2006 WTCC season, reproduced with Simbin's characteristic attention to detail, wide-eyed obsession with realism and love of tinkering with sprockets the size of your fist.

Yet where the vicious, bone-shaking period shuttles of *GT Legends* seemed to relish humiliating dreadfully inadequate newcomers, and *GTR2*'s glamorous racing cars rumbled coquettishly about whether you were really up to the job, *RACE*'s inoffensive cast is positively welcoming. It's understandable that the ego-searing difficulty has been tweaked, given the WTCC-fan-seeking licence, but the upturn in gamer-friendliness is also down to the WTCC itself, which is almost exclusively populated by front-wheel-drive cars.

These are the sort of A to B transports that run grooves in motorways at the cold hands of sales reps. They're tweaked and beefed, but still offer no match for *GTR2*'s Ferraris, Porsches and Lamborghinis. They're also more forgiving, making *RACE* a far more accessible title than its predecessors. Which, of course, isn't a sin. But it does mean fewer thrills and more grind out on the track, thanks to a tamer selection of racing metal.

Often with rear-wheel-drive a skilled racer can correct a slight mistake with a measured blip on the throttle. It either gives much-needed grip or it leaves you rocketing sideways at the barrier, but the risk is exhilarating. Enter a corner at the wrong angle with front-wheel-drive, however, and there's little answer but to kill your speed and wait for the corner to open up – often while watching as your more disciplined rivals stream past. *RACE* can boast some agile handling – and some pleasingly well-realised lift-off oversteer to play with – but there's no risk, resulting in a dry and restrained experience.

Thankfully, *RACE*'s somewhat ordinary drive is offset by the WTCC's sprint race formula. Races are regularly less than 16 laps long, creating a palpable air of urgency and a pressing need to exceed your abilities and go for broke. Even with the stolid, reliable vehicles, a tight race can provide breathless action and occasionally some dramatic finishes. *RACE* is also the first PC driving sim to offer the devilish Macau street circuit, easily the most challenging and enjoyable track in the whole championship.

It's disappointing, though, to see a grid limited to only 25 entrants (of the 58 drivers included in the game) when the real-life WTCC can feature 30 drivers funnelling into the first turn at Monza. The dreary engine sampling isn't up to Simbin's previously high aural standard, with a particularly ugly noise produced when hitting the rev-limiter in top gear. And the bland cockpit views have none of the personality of *GTR2* or *GT Legends*. Worse, the huge modding community won't find it quite so hospitable without *GTR2*'s much-admired openness.

But while it's hardly aspirational racing material, *RACE* at least replicates the championship's stimulating highlights in as expert a fashion as it does the lacklustre lowlights. Even so, hard-bitten graduates of *GTR2* and *GT Legends* would be smart to approach *RACE* with few expectations, or perhaps leave it to the newcomers it has clearly been designed to attract. **[7]**



Dashboard details in the cockpit view are basic, but the viewpoint is otherwise accomplished, providing excellent visibility without detracting from the atmosphere. In addition to the 2006 season, *RACE* also features Mini Cooper and 1987-set WTCC race action, though the Minis are awful to drive and the '87 WTCC features only two models of car





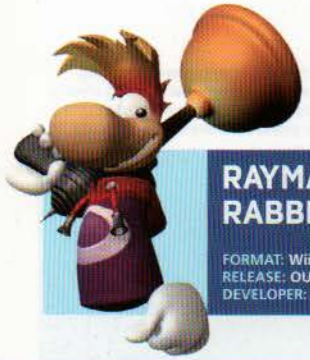


Covering the racing line, your rivals politely line up behind. The AI seems timid and unlikely to take risks, preferring to take the safer route around your vehicle. Opponents will fight for position, but measured aggression usually wins out

Something for the weekend

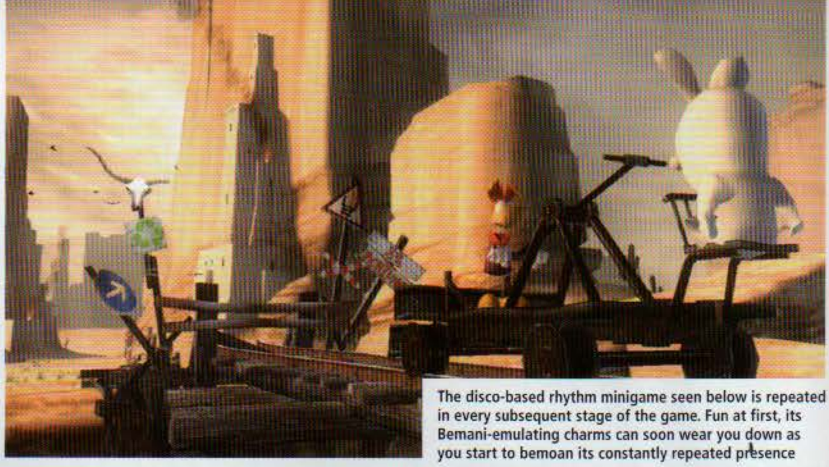


The WTCC's weekend race format works wonders for *RACE*'s appeal. With six events – two time-limited practices, one qualification, a warm up and two concurrent races – drivers can conceivably learn a circuit on their first visit, making Championship mode significantly less intimidating. But drivers of any ability will appreciate the gripping double race format. Both races are no more than 16 laps longs, rewarding aggressive, ambitious driving. And as session two reverses the first eight places from the last race, you're encouraged to persevere through tough times with the chance to make amends the second time around.



RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS

FORMAT: Wii (VERSION TESTED) PS2 PRICE: £40 (Wii) £30 (PS2)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTPELLIER PREVIOUSLY IN: E170



The disco-based rhythm minigame seen below is repeated in every subsequent stage of the game. Fun at first, its Bemani-emulating charms can soon wear you down as you start to bemoan its constantly repeated presence



Platform(ing) shoes



It's long been common knowledge that *Raving Rabbids* on the Wii shelves the traditional platforming format of the previous *Rayman* games entirely, but it's a little bit of a surprise to see that the same is true of its PS2 incarnation. Presumably heavy on the button mashing front, the latter's control system will be an interesting counterpoint to the perceived uniqueness of the Wii Remote. Ubisoft's decision to release this version of the game on both formats will also be the first chance to test the Wii's visual capabilities against established hardware on a like for like basis. As a franchise in itself, *Raving Rabbids* will also making an appearance on the DS, where it'll revert back to having a platforming structure.

It's in the nature of the *Rayman* series never to solidify, a mainstay of creator Michel Ancel's commitment to providing increasing amounts of freedom in each of his games. *Rayman Raving Rabbids* is certainly freeform, with the option to tackle its micro-size stages from any number of routes as they become available. Tied to the fact that the introduction of the psychotic rabbits of the title is a triumph of a collective dark imagination, the game has plenty to offer those for whom videogaming is infrequent and short lived. But while it's not difficult to foresee whole delighted families marvelling at Ubisoft's launch title, even very casual gamers are likely to find its many repetitions tiresome.

Rayman's world is invaded by the disgustingly fabulous rabbids of the title, a technologically-advanced race of cruel idiot bunnies. After imprisoning Rayman in a gladiatorial arena, the evil creatures force him to perform a series of motion-controlled tasks that make up the game's central collection of minigames. Claiming to offer over 70 of these is slightly disingenuous since many of the control mechanisms repeat themselves throughout play. Whether a repeated race against time qualifies as a separate minigame in its own right is contentious: especially when you consider that the frantic up/down movement needed to complete the stage is always the same.

Which isn't to say that these games can't be fun: the settings and scenarios are often pitched with a great deal of gross-out gallows humour that can genuinely prompt laugh out loud moments. Drowning rabbits in their own carrot juice is one example, using the Wii Remote as an aiming device and the Nunchuk as a pump. Firing plungers into the faces of toddler bunnies *Time Crisis*-style is another, providing moments of the kind of joyous cartoon violence we loved in our youth. But with alarming regularity, you find yourself carrying out the same tasks only faster, a physically tiring process considering that the game can be quite ergonomically demanding.



The *Time Crisis* FPS levels are a kind of reward for stage completion – it's also the most successful of the minigames available, with the Wii Remote proving its accuracy as a weapon against fast-paced enemy rabbits

Multiplayer should have been *Rayman's* saving grace, but too many of the multiplayer challenges are geared towards taking turns; simultaneous play is reserved largely for the end-of-level FPS and race bonuses of the story mode. Furthermore, multiplayer itself is an unlockable feature, forcing you to replay levels over yet again just to have the experience of playing them with, or against, somebody else.

Visually, *Raving Rabbids* often leaves a lot to be desired; its cod tropical settings reminding you of nothing so much as *Ty The Tasmanian Tiger* on the original Xbox. The CG cutscenes are far more successful, with the frenzied charisma of the lunatic rabbits shining through.

Many of *Raving Rabbids'* singular elements are successful at providing the kind of light-hearted experience an introduction to the Wii should offer. But as a whole, the game's a far more problematic affair – a party game collection for which you have to work far too hard to get much of a chance to party. **[6]**







It's a shame that none of Rayman's signature abilities are present in the game. In fact, he's reduced to little more than a periphery menu navigation tool, used to switch from minigame to minigame. The fact that his appearance is customisable helps to mix play up a little bit, but it's not really enough of a novelty to sustain interest



TONY HAWK'S DOWNHILL JAM

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: TOYS FOR BOB









Boost is activated by shaking the Wii Remote, but there's an alternative option that almost makes the gesture defunct. When the stick is held like a pad, the B button sits very close to the fingers of the left hand, meaning there's simply no need to risk messing up any steering with a quick jiggle when a brief knuckle-nudge will do just as well

This isn't the first time that Toys for Bob has spun the *Tony Hawk* framework for its own end; *Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure* saw the studio produce a proficient but lightweight repackaging of Neversoft's complex signature skate series, which remains an effective summation of *Downhill Jam*. The Wii Remote's motion sensing is used for balancing grinds, steering, recovery and triggering boost and, while none of these aspects are particularly sloppy, they don't feel like they lend any greater analogue feedback to the experience. Races – plus other events that focus on combos, slaloms or thudding into bystanders – offer some great speed alongside a good chunk of the *Tony Hawk* trickset that's been worked into the configuration, but it's a game that can't match the grander airtime and stuntwork, and more measured pacing, of the *SSX* series.

Despite having been designed with ease of use in mind – grinds are generously sticky and simple to maintain, and the majority of events are brief to the point that retries are both rare and seldom begrudged – it's when you're pushed to exploit the game world for skilful times and scores that it can begin to feel ungainly. It only takes one or two dead-stop bumps into a lamppost, or barrier-deflections that send you back uphill, to make you pine for the instant, switchback behaviour of a D-pad. But such an ache is never an obstacle for progression through the great number of events offered, only when aiming for gold medal targets. Recycling of the game's eight courses is tempered by offering plenty of variants on familiar trick-lines and the broaching of new territory. But the thrills – especially when you discover a new path or ramp that takes you into high-rise territory you didn't expect existed – are just too short-lived, and it simply doesn't stand up as a more boisterous alternative to the razor-sharp focus and freshness of *Project 8* on 360. **[5]**



Aside from Hawk, the remaining characters are made from generic personality types who appear in short, silly interviews at the beginning of each race. The resulting effect ends up feeling like something more kiddy than was maybe intended



GUNPEY DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£15) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: Q ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E166

Returning to the genre it so enlivened with *Meteos*, Q Entertainment's latest punctuates something of a fallow period for the developer. While not as triumphant as the aforementioned puzzler, *Gunpey* nonetheless has much charm of its own, and proves that the title was worth rescuing from its WonderSwan cradle.

Offering a fresh twist on the block-matching puzzle standard, here the aim is to match line-scribed panels *across* a five-square-wide grid. Create an unbroken line across the playing field and the panels are cleared, giving respite from the ever-rising panels below. Strategy enters through the pause given before a completed line explodes and disappears; during this brief window, further lines can be added to the chain, allowing you to do essential housework and clear bothersome clutter. Naturally, more points are scored for longer lines; the four different panels available can be connected, luck and time allowing, in ever-more baroque and labyrinthine ways. Explode over 14 panels at once and one of four special attacks is made available, ranging from randomising opponents' tiles to switching to touch control only.

It's an engrossing system, if not an overly intuitive one, made more attractive by musical cues that blend in and out of the infuriatingly catchy soundtrack. Nevertheless, there are problems; the hyper-colourful aesthetic means that lines – never the most exciting visual focus a game could have – are sometimes lost on the day-glo background 'skins', and the special attacks more often than not offer frustration and annoyance rather than genuine challenge or obstacle. Other niggles amplify themselves, too; you can't enter initials for high scores, and the potentially wonderful Sound Box, an editor allowing you to stitch musical samples from the game together in your own compositions, won't let you import your creations into the main game – a maddening omission.

While undeniably entertaining, then – masochists will undoubtedly enjoy the Double Screen mode, where flipping between two playing areas stretches the game's format to its limits – *Gunpey* remains something of a quirky offshoot than a bold new puzzling dawn. However, it is an offshoot well worth exploring, and while not the comeback many had perhaps expected from Q Entertainment, it at least does the late Gunpei Yokoi (the game's creator) proud. **[6]**



Double Screen mode lets you flip between two different playing areas. Sedate at first, trying to clear the two screens of lines quickly becomes a challenge. But for those who like their puzzling to be nerve-wracking, it takes some beating



The character design and graphical style – bold, fluorescent, stylised – makes for a game that is both charming and even, at times, actually too bright and colourful. Each character, as you'd expect, has his or her own signature musical style



CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥5,040 (JAPAN), $35 (US), £30 (UK)
RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN, US), FEBRUARY 23 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Paintings provide a portal, reminiscent of those in *Mario 64*, to other levels and worlds. This transforms the environments and lifts you out of the confines of the castle, expanding the game's visual identity

If *Portrait Of Ruin* proves anything, it's how intimate and refreshing an experience the DS can offer when its games are developed for their own sake, rather than purely for the tactile innovations that it affords. In 2004's *Dawn Of Sorrow*, the integration of touchscreen functionality diluted the experience somewhat, although it remained an essential instalment. *Portrait Of Ruin*, however, expands the remit of *Castlevania* in several ways, and concretes the reputation of the series as the most compelling action experience that Nintendo's little handheld can offer.

Steeped in *Castlevania* lore and nostalgic to a fault, the game finds its castle primarily nestled within a stylised pre-war Europe. Controlling both Jonathan (classic whip-wielding hero) and Charlotte (a skilled magician, reprising the summon-spell dynamic of *Dawn Of Sorrow*), you'll fight your way through a labyrinthine narrative (and map) to an ultimate showdown with vampire twin sisters. Resolutely 2D and 16bit through and through, its sweeping synths and simplistic speech files are a reminder of the days when the bar for action-platformers was set dauntingly high.

New co-operative elements work extremely well, and the CPU does an excellent job of imitating other human players if you've no one to actually team up with, either locally or online. Providing this constant illusion of multiplayer is a clever way of forcing you to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of both characters, whose use is integral to completing the game.

The meat of the game remains the franchise's staple hacking and slashing: it's a tad repetitive perhaps, but mitigated by the delightfully reactive animations of the masses of monsters on offer. And breaking the potential monotony is the addition of of optional sub-quests, which provide satisfying objectives when you run into the game's deliberate sticking points.

Full of bravado, packed with features and brimming with invention, this 20-year-old veteran is as vital and relevant as ever. **[8]**



Don't worry, this isn't any kind of spoiler: it's from Boss Rush mode, a timed obstacle course against a series of *Castlevania's* famed bosses



PHOENIX WRIGHT: JUSTICE FOR ALL

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥3,500 (£15)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E157

Liberal use of the gavel has yet to dull a *Phoenix Wright* trial, but for half of *Justice For All*, you'll think that it's about to go that way. A blow to the head of its ace attorney sets up the first case, a quick refresher that reacquaints *Phoenix* with both his friends and the idiosyncrasies of the turnabout courtroom. Cases in this second game have lengthened considerably, allowing for far more twists and turns both on and off the stand, with larger inventories of evidence and personality profiles. But while it supports some clever new devices – profiles, for example, can now be presented as evidence – the added weight seems too much to carry on the shoulders of some really rather pedestrian characters.

Thank God then for Director Hotti, a bogus clinician and self-professed 'dictiopedia' of hospitalised women, who's actually a deranged patient with a mouthful of missing teeth and groping nervous tick. In *Justice For All*'s own turnabout, his arrival – just before the halfway point – marks the reopening of the door to the criminally narcissistic, impertinent and insane personalities that, with their meagre allotment of GBA-inherited animations, will have you rolling about the bench. Newly added Psyche Locks – literally padlocks that guard these characters' secrets – have done much to redress the previous game's cognitive imbalance between the investigation and trial phases, creating situations in which one set of gathered evidence must be used to unlock another, and broadening the game's overall repertoire of logic puzzles.

But, as ever, *Phoenix Wright* logic prevails over common sense. The system by which the information becomes an object, and conversations become trades, remains – perhaps unavoidably – an arcane basis for natural deduction. To make matters worse, there are several vital clues and associations that simply drift past amid the dense, often repetitious, dialogue in the hope that you're taking notes. Cross examinations, furthermore, with their innocuous babble and hidden truths, still favour exhaustiveness – a rather dulling discipline – over specificity or intuition. Acting more like the bad guy of the profession then, *Justice For All* ultimately wins you over with its charm rather than its virtue. **[6]**





A determination to have you share Phoenix's frustration with unco-operative witnesses and conversations that, by the game's admission, are a waste of time, makes *Justice For All* a sometimes hostile experience



WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DEEP SILVER/BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: BLACK HOLE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E167

Familiar to those of us who'd hang around after school with a copy of White Dwarf, a hundred-sided die and a ruler, *Warhammer: Mark Of Chaos* brings the Orks, Dwarves, Elves and Skaven to a traditional RTS. Allowing you to mount a campaign as either the heroic Ostermark Empire or evil Hordes of Chaos, you're set the usual task of conquering all who stand in your way.

Probably the first thing you'll notice about *Mark Of Chaos* is how widely the terrible in-game cutscenes contrast with a beautifully rendered intro movie: characters turn from lovingly realised virtual actors to potato-headed caricatures in a matter of minutes. Unfortunately, its issues are far from just cosmetic. Commanding troops is all too often a chore: frequent changing between units is to be expected, but a clumsy control system prohibits switching as quickly as you'd like. Tactically, your only hope usually lies in storming the enemy – it's almost impossible to make smart, strategic decisions because of the way locations have been mapped. Inevitably, combat usually descends into a simple numbers game – the largest army always tipping the balance.



Beautifully painted loading screens milk the licence effectively, which is for the best since each is on display for far too long – adding insult to injury since each is also preceded by a separate, plain-text loading screen of its own



Environments and characters are strongly reminiscent of The Creative Assembly's *Total War* series – no bad template from which to work. Visuals are generally very accomplished, as is the level of motion-captured animation on display

These problems are damaging, but not terminal. Duelling against enemy warlords and heroes demands the kind of tactical skill other sections of the game lack. Character behaviour in battles is shrewdly observed – an amalgam of bloodiness and slapstick humour – and environments have just as much personality. Magic use adds a charismatic, chaotic element, and is carried out to some degree by all characters, not just the game's eccentric wizards.

But, ultimately, *Mark Of Chaos* needed to use its licence to mark it out in an over-crowded genre. And, for all the atmospheric window-dressing, it doesn't extend its reach beyond competent familiarity. **[6]**





THRILLVILLE

FORMAT: PSP, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: FRONTIER PREVIOUSLY IN: E169





Visitors roam, queue and ride in realtime, but that doesn't stop you hopping on an attraction yourself. Any visitor can be spoken to, but the number of dialogue strands that need working through to achieve success becomes a grind

Thrillville is full of things to do rather than things to tweak. It's a reinterpretation of the funfair tycoon template that turns it into a cheery, multifaceted party game for one, with virtually every aspect of the park's success driven by minigame activities. It puts the genre through a Happy Meal blender, doing away with the micromanagement labour of optimal, tile-accurate use of resources and settings; the pureed result is hardly going to touch the sides for seasoned thrill engineers, but it can certainly be enjoyed through a straw.

Each of the game's five main parks is broken up into modules, each park having a preset theme and each module having its own sub-theme, with an exhaustive selection of attractions and exclusive pre-built region-specific coasters that cover the spectrum of fairground skins. Within each module are predefined areas for building rides, games and stalls, giving as little room for strategy as error, but just configurable enough to feel personal. The structure's simple, but the quantity of content is vast, from the abundance of minigames – which vary from well-produced arcade experiences to by-the-numbers tasks – to some pleasing animatronic installations, to sound design that includes radio stations and lengthy conversation strands with any of the park's visitors.

While its appeal may have some age restrictions, some of those minigames are deceptively distracting, and doubly so. First, it's due to just how much effort has gone into the best – such as a *TimeSplitters*-lite FPS with room for multiple weapons and headshot skill, the pop-gun shooting galleries, a cheerleading rhythm-action task whose pace and gratification grazes that of *Gitaroo Man* in its later stages, or the score-chain system of its vertical shooter. Second, these are minigames that know many games, and pay a detailed enough homage to titles such as *R-Type* or *Gauntlet* – offering multiple ships and weapon setups in the case of the former – for them to prove an unexpected and hard-to-resist distraction.

If *Thrillville*'s aim was to emulate *Lego Star Wars*' philosophy – a game *actually for* kids instead of one for parents to buy, accessible and engaging without being patronising or simplistic – it has amply succeeded, although it's a game whose appeal won't straddle demographics as easily as LucasArts' little people. **[7]**



SUPERMAN RETURNS: THE VIDEOGAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS2, PSP, XBOX
PRICE: £50 (360), £40 (PS2, XBOX), £35 (PSP) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** EA TIBURON **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E166

Like that of a comic book villain, *Superman Returns*' story is one of grand ambition sewn with the seeds of its own downfall. At a push, its fastidiously landscaped environment plays host to just an hour's worth of unique content, the remaining five comprising a wholly imbecilic experience-points ladder of spiritless chores. How, you'll ask yourself, was a bold, very expensive attempt to model the *Superman* experience derailed so utterly by the need to be a videogame?

It happened long before it missed the movie's release date, for sure. A game that finds time to put birds in the skies over Metropolis but not characters in the streets, waypoints on the map or intrigue in its story can barely be said to have established its course in the first place, let alone wandered from it. Limited to either pest or fire control – the pests being robots, reptiles or a recurring clutch of Superman's historic foes – the duties imposed on the Man of Steel form a truly dire rota of button-combo brawls. Like a novelty clock decorated with gleaming spires and mechanical figurines, *Superman Returns* lurches between periods of idleness and perfunctory routine, repeating that process over and over without end.

Elsewhere, scant time trials, destruction missions (featuring that arch-dullard Bizarro), and a wholly pointless hunt for 100 stray kittens afford the game few pleasures beyond, funnily enough, the periods of quite anodyne isolation in between. The ability to simply yank the camera skyward and bolt into clear blue is without question the greatest of Superman's allocated powers, and the considerable time spent flitting about Metropolis' skyline like some tourist of The Twilight Zone is, in every sense, a solitary grace.



With the cruelties of Lex Luthor trapped within disassociated cutscenes, rare showdowns with mother nature provide *Returns'* only real drama. The action is basic, but the scale is overwhelming

By even the lowest expectations *Superman Returns* is a staggering shortfall – neither the responsibilities of its hero's role nor the example of *Spider-Man 2*'s influential sandbox being approached with an ounce of sincerity. So disjointed are the possibilities of its physics system and the requirements of its action that, though the truth may never emerge, there's every reason to suspect a creative change of hands in those frantic months past deadline. **[3]**





Superman may be able to outpace a speeding bullet with just the punch of a bumper button, but sadly the lock-on system that guides his powers seldom keeps up. Not that it matters; Metropolis' rather generous health bar means that even the messiest of attacks will eventually succeed, the bystanders clocked by the flailing fists of steel simply getting up and trotting off



ELITE BEAT AGENTS

FORMAT: DS **PRICE:** £25 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** INIS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164





Taking place on a scrollable globe, *Elite Beat Agents* loses the sense of community that *Ouendan* had – particularly where its character cameos are cross-pollinated from story to story

Not so much a localisation job or refurbishment of *Ouendan* as a wholesale westernisation, *Elite Beat Agents* is consequently a completely new game – albeit one that sticks to the tenets of the iNiS rhythm-action classic.

As before, you're required to touch the screen to the rhythm, picking out a series of numbered spots, whose tap-timing can be anticipated by their ever-decreasing circles, while sliding rollerball arcs and spinners give pleasing, tactile variety to your dancing stylus. The objective? To cheerlead each protagonist to victory through a series of bizarre quandaries: a dog attempting to return to its master, an inept businessman-turned-ninja trying to gain favour with his father, and a girl-next-door attempting to 'go steady' with a high school jock through the trauma of babysitting.



It's testament to *Elite Beat Agents'* mechanics that – as with all good rhythm action – on the higher difficulties you invariably feel as if you're *playing* each track rather than just reacting to it

Aesthetically speaking, there's a difference this time around. Agent character models have undergone a transformation that's more FBI than Gestapo – and the overall presentation is less edgy than before. Less punchy, yet a touch more polished, it's still mindful of its Japanese origins – attempting, with some success, to deliver the same frenetic eccentricity of *Ouendan*. But fans may find it's lost some of the original's charisma, and the absurdity of many of the stories often feels a little contrived.

Of course, it's the music that's important here, and *Elite Beat Agents* delivers. Much of the playlist might consist of the kind of music best tolerated through the barricaded door of an adolescent's bedroom, but in fairness there's a fine selection here, with covers of YMCA, Material Girl, Canned Heat and Mercury's I Was Born To Love You nicely offsetting the raucousness of Sum 41's Makes No Difference. And though there's plenty here that won't be to everyone's taste, some care has been taken to ensure that each track matches each comic with enough skill to provoke a wry smile or snort of amusement.

Much of *Ouendan*'s alien charm is lost due to the use of familiar songs, but overall there's a superior selection of music (fans will delight at Over the Distance's rather twee replacement) making it a perfect complement to a much-loved contemporary classic. **[7]**


SPEEDBALL 2

TIME EXTEND

SPEEDBALL 2: BRUTAL DELUXE

FORMAT: **AMIGA**
PUBLISHER: **IMAGEWORKS**
DEVELOPER: **THE BITMAP BROTHERS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **1990**

How did gaming's sport of tomorrow become stuck in a league of its own?



Given the choice between subtle shades and dramatic tonal shifts by the Amiga's lacking on-screen palette, *Speedball 2* made the right choice. Gaudier upgrades to the later CD32 version, however, were ill-advised



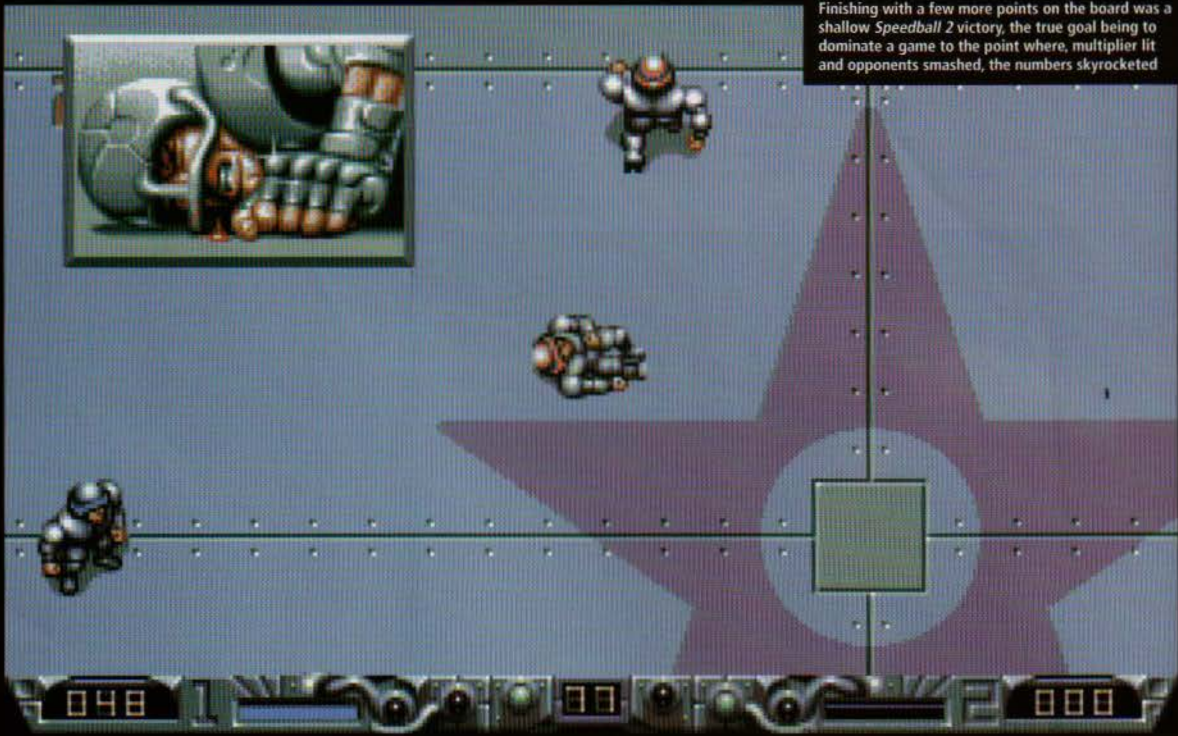
For Amiga gamers in 1990 the world was oval, its core a rectangle. Time existed as 90-second intervals, each announced and punctuated by an electric buzz, a pneumatic hiss and the sound of 36 fists and feet converging on a steel sphere. Zig-zagging sprints and hurdles were burned on to the eyes, the ears filled by a raucous metallic churn. Bodies were folded, flung, and sacrificed to hungry scoreboards and an insatiable crowd. 'One day,' promised *Speedball 2*, 'all sports will be played like this.'

But somehow, come the day, none of them were.

Having consummated The Bitmap Brothers' dominion over the Amiga's arcade scene, sent journalists into hyperbolic fifth gear, broken Japan and laid the foundations of Renegade (a developer-focused publishing collaboration with Rhythm King Records), *Speedball 2* became a conundrum, zealously guarding its fanbase and confounding those that conspired to take it away. 'Like *Speedball*' became an enduring industry analogy, saved for the occasion when some brave fool would ride on the game's coat-tails and inevitably fall off. An officially developed successor, PlayStation's *Speedball 2100* [4/10, **E**90], disappeared into budget obscurity almost upon release, and when the Bitmaps tried again with the PC's (unreleased) *Speedball Arena*, *they* disappeared.

People will always covet the object of such a curse, not least when it represents something unparalleled in modern times. But dissecting *Speedball 2*, just as the industry so often reverse-engineers anything worth exploiting, reveals an anatomy of irregular parts and associations. There's a top-down camera cranked impractically close to the action, undermining the spatial awareness so imperative to videogame soccer; there are star players that specialise in disrupting team dynamics, commanding both attention and opposition; there's a pitch that resembles a pinball table of warps, rails and bumpers, sending the ball into potentially accidental score lines.

Moreover, the tempo of tackles and lobs is just as influential as their direction, the pulse of the one-button control scheme permeating the subconscious like that of a modern rhythm game, albeit one where the beats are solely to the face. And 90 seconds of *Speedball 2* seldom entails fewer than 90 separate moments, ball possession swinging between teams like a pendulum. The trick, in singleplayer especially, is to break that default rhythm and impose one of your own, each button press powering the stride of a freight-train centre forward.



Finishing with a few more points on the board was a shallow *Speedball 2* victory, the true goal being to dominate a game to the point where, multiplier lit and opponents smashed, the numbers skyrocketed



BRUTAL REDUX

As German publisher Frogster prepares its 2007 remake of *Speedball 2* for PC, the raw materials for an intriguing *Speedball 3* are still there, waiting in Harrison's short story for (re)discovery. The spiral of the game into a bloodsport, for example, is something *Speedball 2* alluded to as part of its backstory but wisely, given its various economies, avoided in practice. Harrison's illustrations of that premise include sordid mixed gender games with tearaway kits, penalties by which helmets are removed for 'boring' play, oddly shaped balls that arbitrarily maim their captors, and last-man-standing matches fought on what the author terms "a streak of blood". Presented in a purposeful way, that could at least turn the microscope on gaming's own predilection for cruelty.

With that in mind, there's little of recognisable substance in contrived clones such as *Deathrow*, the recent Xbox title that swaps ball for luminous disc. That crude science by which a seminal game's uppermost layers are sliced off, updated, re-branded and rearranged is squandered on the likes of *Speedball* – a product of genuine chemistry. Track one of the Bitmaps to their latter-day post – Eric Matthews is director of creative development at SCEE Studios London and Cambridge, Mike Montgomery a co-founder and manager of mobile developer Tower Studios, Dan Malone an artist-for-hire designing characters for the new *SSX* – and they'll likely recall the tattered cigarette packets and notebooks upon which genres were improbably spliced, rules unflinchingly rewritten, and *Speedball* born again. Irregular and inspiring, games of its kind are the very stuff of gaming, the creative sparks that fire their manufacture becoming the ciphers that keep them unique.

And to complicate matters for the aspiring successor, chemistry means little without a catalyst, in *Speedball*'s case Rollerball, the sci-fi short and midnight movie adaptation. Just as William Harrison's bleak omen, (published in Esquire magazine as Roller Ball Murder), was a sign of its times, the blood-soaked marriage of roller derby, lacrosse and mixed martial arts it introduced was a symptom of the times it foretold. Corporatised and debased, with all history and wisdom filed and forgotten by a senile computer, the world of Roller Ball Murder revolved entirely around its stadia – great cauldrons in which societal emotion, ambition, and appetite could be drowned in blood and conveniently flushed away.

What began as a quick, entirely shameless parody of James Caan's lionised Rollerballer Jonathan E blossomed into emphatic tribute

Having captured the vigour of this conceit with the first *Speedball* – a comparatively rudimentary and somewhat sluggish prototype – the Bitmaps returned to it in earnest for the sequel. What began as a quick, entirely shameless parody of James Caan's lionised Rollerballer Jonathan E (*Speedball*'s menu screens hosting the image of a spiked glove drummed nervously against an armoured thigh, the character's iconic tick) blossomed under artist Malone into emphatic tribute. Reverent and yet unique, exuberant and yet breathlessly simple, the ascension story of *Speedball* zeroes Brutal Deluxe was a premier league adaptation.

The emblematic and imperial visual style, which would later cross seamlessly into the steampunk estates of *The Chaos Engine* and the storied kingdom of *Gods*, was arguably best employed here. Feeding on a concept rich with visual symmetries, *Speedball 2*'s art conveyed more in one title screen than many a subsequent glut of expository text and FMV. The sport's new stadium, evidently descended as much from 2000AD as

Meticulous training and coin harvesting during play would, in keeping with the game's premise, elevate Brutal Deluxe to league-conquering form. Signing players from the transfer market, however, and using their immediate prowess to steamroller opponents was a guilty delight, blessing your team with a more convincing collective gurn



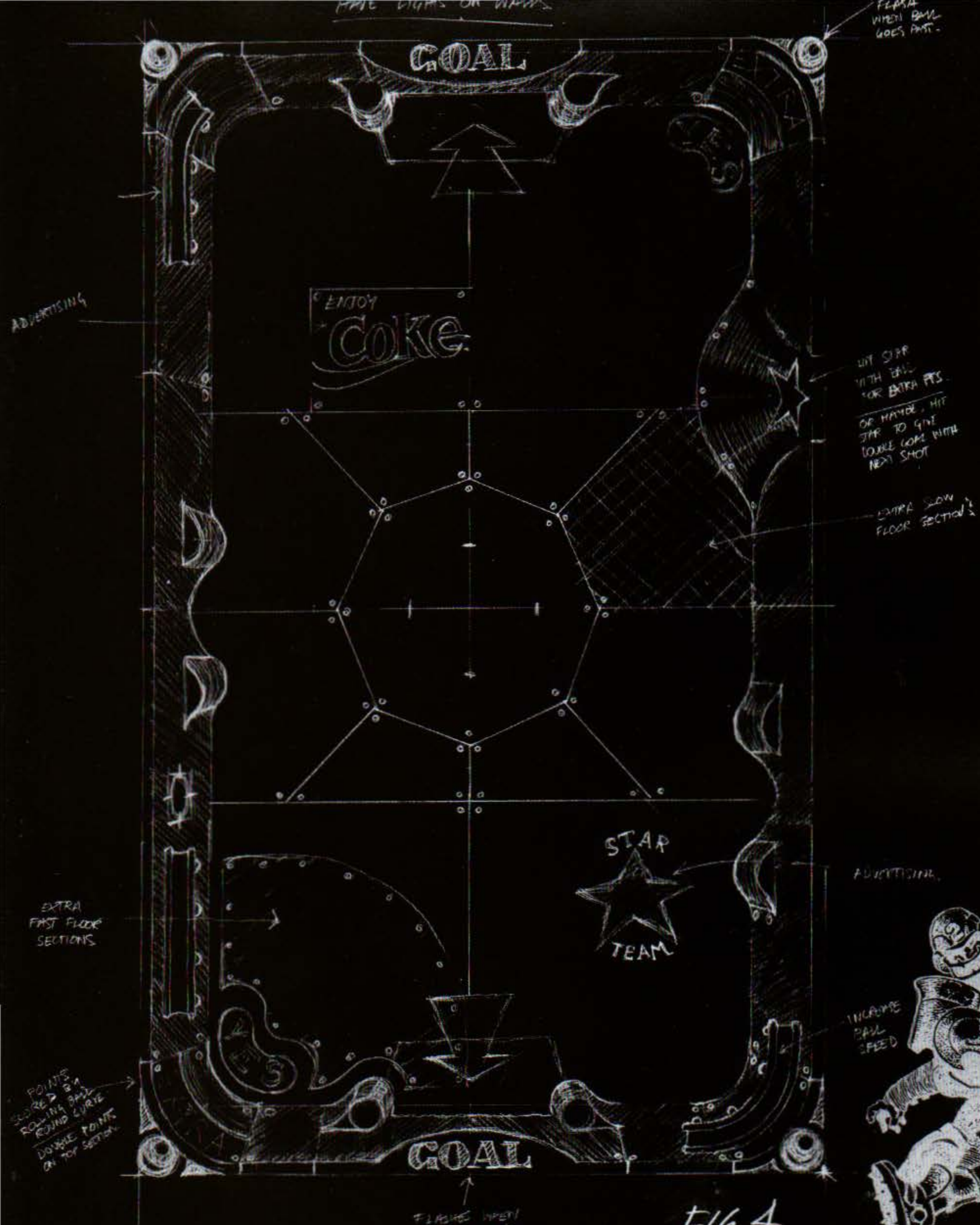


FIG 4.



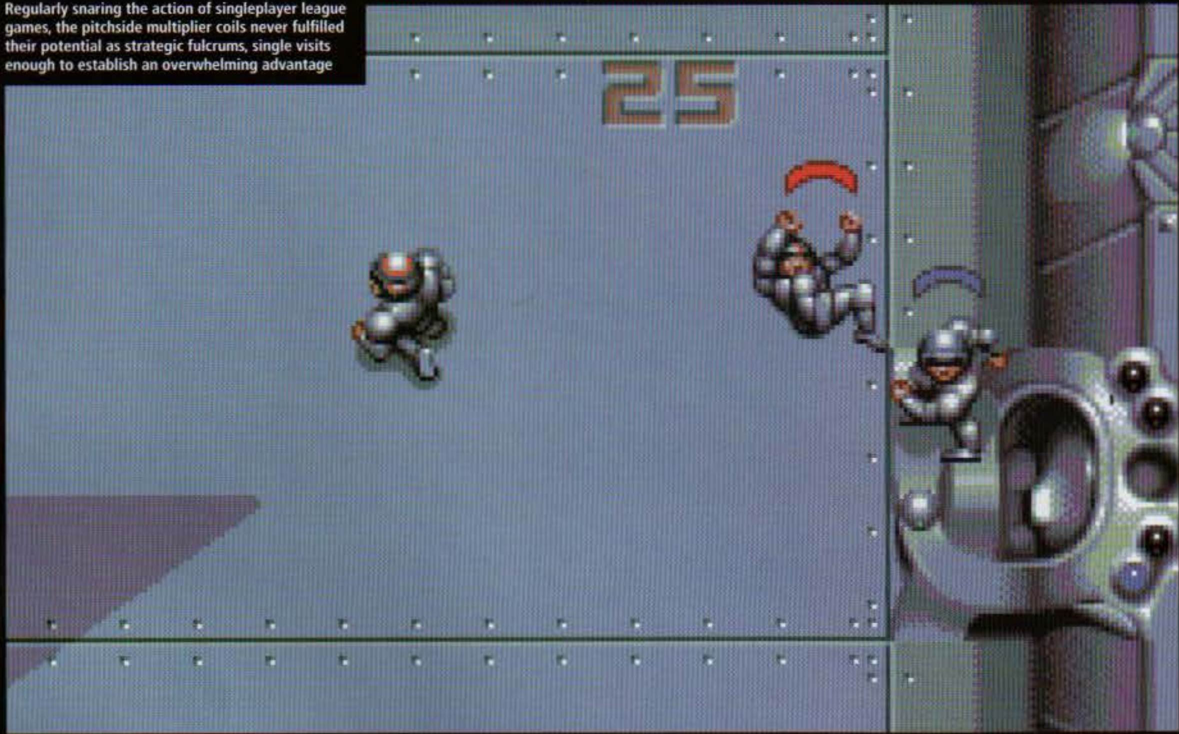


In-house artwork would trade places on the game's box for that of renowned comic book artist Glenn Fabry, a tradition upheld by the employment of Simon Bisley for later titles. Left: The enchanting prospect of a game design expressed almost entirely by a single sketch. Note the integration of power-ups into the pitch, later to evolve into pick-ups









Regularly snaring the action of singleplayer league games, the pitchside multiplier coils never fulfilled their potential as strategic fulcrums, single visits enough to establish an overwhelming advantage

70AD Rome, was every bit the hub of a world consumed by decadent spectacle, shown to be fed by every street, terraced by every skyscraper, and floodlit by every star. Seldom were fewer pixels wasted than in Malone's translations of ink and pencil into digital assets, and as the memories of Ray-Ban shades and helicopter photo-shoots date and fade away, the image of the Bitmaps as deceptively scrupulous economists continues to emerge.

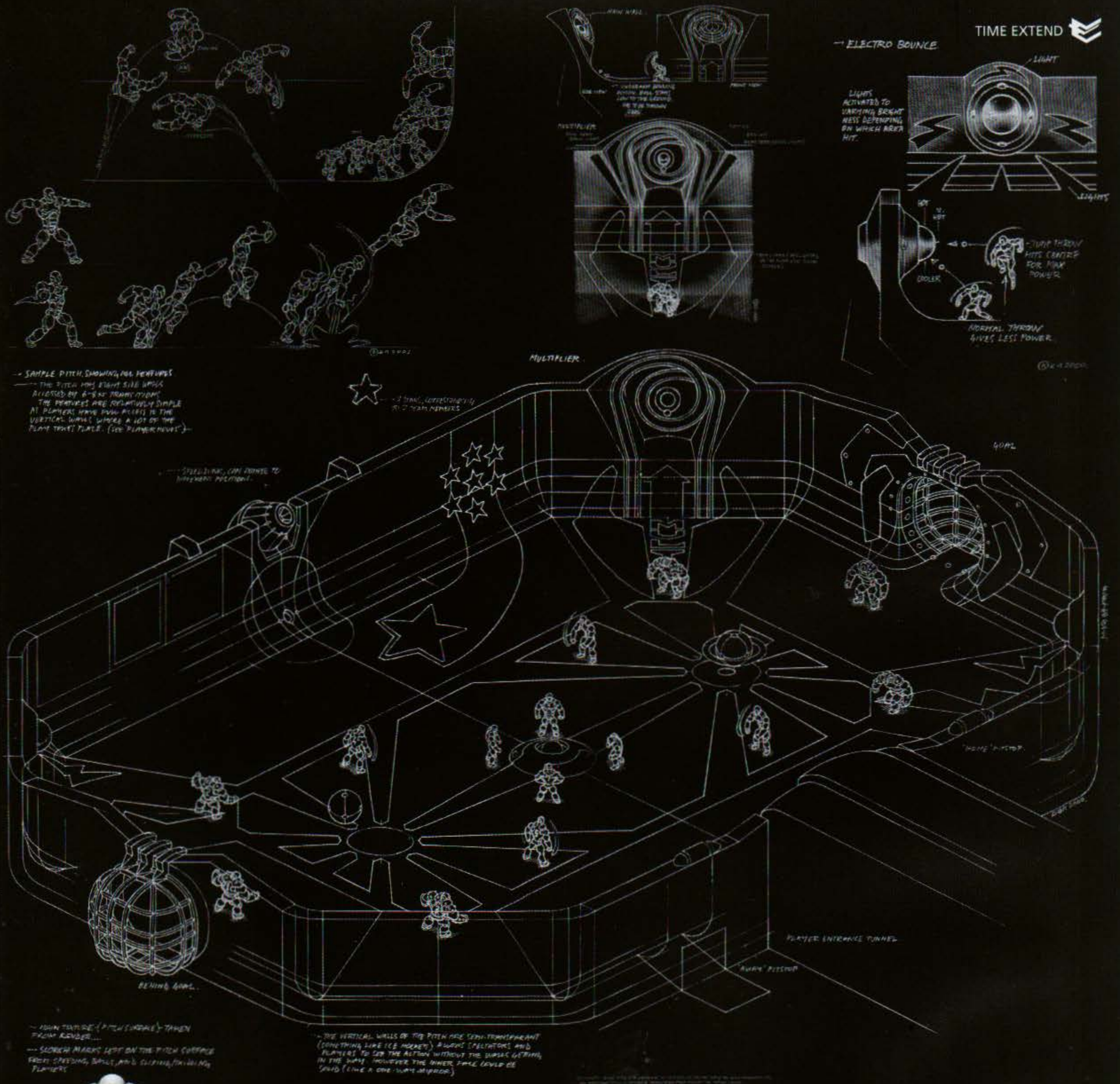
A lack of detail in the floors of the new pitch, for instance, proved vital for achieving *Speedball 2*'s frenetic pace, while collaborator Nation 12's boisterous theme tune validated its consumption of precious kilobytes by establishing, in an off-key series of barks, the game's revised demeanour. During match play, through little more than static picture-in-picture panels and a man who'd hijack an audio channel to sell ice cream, *Speedball 2* also addressed the oft-neglected relationship between a sport and its crowd; *Unreal Tournament*, *Quake*, and similar hybrids of shooter and sport would stumble in pursuit of the same goal, and continue to today. Even Bombing Run, *UT*'s laudable attempt to concentrate attention on a single point (a projectile fired between rather than at its players), lacks the intense focus of *Speedball 2*'s eight-way scrolling blitz.

Deep within the convoluted literalism of *Pro Evo* and *NFL* are dynamics that everyone should be able to enjoy, regardless of their interest in sport

Not long after *Speedball 2* got it right, of course, the old economies collapsed: bitplanes became 3D space, pixels became polygons, stick and button became sticks, buttons, triggers and pad, and the Bitmap Brothers became craftsmen robbed of their craft. While the crookedness of early 3D made a sorry mess of their designs, a greater disappointment saw their old disciplines and enthusiasms reduced by transitional trauma, the rule of going back to the source for fresh ideas neglected. *Speedball 2100* became the imitator – a mere face in the crowd.

Today, however, *Speedball 2* seems like less of a conundrum, and more of a challenge. From developers schooled in 3D design it doesn't just ask for insight, spark, and a dash of catholic bravery, but also the acceptance that videogame sport is a genre of two halves: one realistic but limiting, the other abstract but accessible. Deep within the convoluted literalism of games like *Pro Evo* and *NFL* are dynamics that everyone should be able to enjoy, regardless of their interest – or lack of it – in real-world sport. All it would take is to substitute the factual glut and tactical foreplay with two very simple words: *GET READY*.

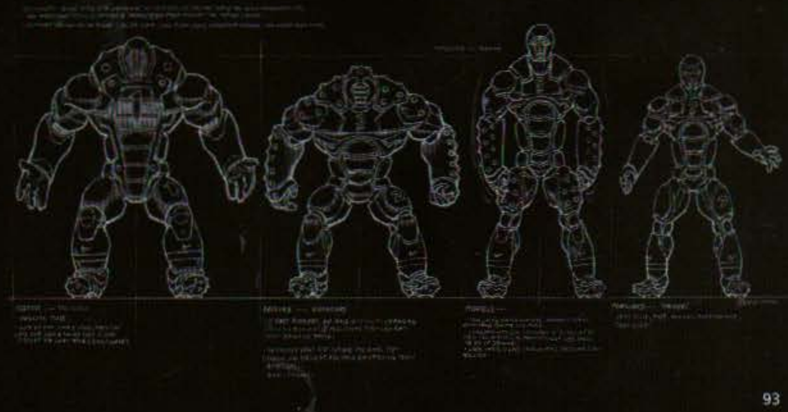






THIRD STRIFE

Given the metal content of games such as *Huxley* and *Gears Of War*, there's every chance than the ill-fated *Speedball Arena* came a couple of Unreal Engines too soon. Malone's working designs for this third proper title, many of which are shown here for the first time, extruded the old arena to give players somewhere to look and jump while sensibly honouring its essential layout. Early screens and test videos, however, show how the limitations of early T&L cards stripped from the game its characteristic density. Modders take note: the *UT2007* editor is just around the corner





THE MAKING OF…
CHOPLIFTER

Grounded in real-life events and forged out of tedium, this homespun action classic still resonates today

FORMAT: **APPLE II** PUBLISHER: **BRODERBUND SOFTWARE** DEVELOPER: **DAN GORLIN** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1982**





January 20 1981 was a particularly jubilant day in recent American history. President Reagan's inauguration ceremony was barely finished when word came through that 52 US hostages being held on Iranian soil had been released after a 444-day ordeal that previous president Jimmy Carter had been unable to resolve. Just under a year earlier, Carter had authorised eight RH-53 helicopters to mount a brazen rescue attempt. It ended in disaster – one of the helicopters collided with a plane and killed eight US servicemen, injuring several others. Whatever the political implications, the image of the helicopter as rescue vehicle had entered the national psyche.

Skip forward two years to May 1983: movie theatres all over the US were plastered with images of an impressively modified Gazelle chopper. Columbia Pictures were just releasing Blue Thunder, a film whose box office takings were initially average but eventually went on to gross over $42 million. The fictitious helicopter graced everything from lunchboxes to colouring books, spawning its own ABC TV series in the meantime. Once again the helicopter was installed in the heart of American popular culture.

Sandwiched between these two, in early 1982, came a game that seemed uncannily placed to tap into both tenuously connected events. An action thriller with a







PORTING BACKWARDS

Choplifter's success led to it taking a curiously reverse route to the arcades. Sega bought the licence for the game in 1985 and ported it itself. Gorlin explains: "I didn't do the coin-op version; that was Sega and other than a few early conversations with the programmers I wasn't involved in the development. But they put my name on it anyway, which was nice of them." Despite including a more traditional scoring structure, Sega's arcade version was such a hit that the game was released on almost every popular gaming machine throughout the 1980s. Gorlin's name was a staple on the game's many ports, from the NES to Texas Instruments' TI-99/40, even though he wasn't directly involved in producing these various iterations.



contemporary twist, the game combined an amazing degree of mechanical control with heart-tugging, high-concept objectives in a way rarely seen in games of the time. Your aim was to harness your helicopter to destroy enemy bases in order to free the hostages imprisoned within. Then you'd have to swoop down, pick them up and fly them back to the safety of your own base. If you executed this badly your hostages would die, either crushed beneath your helicopter or taken out by enemies. *Choplifter* was exhilarating, exacting and very, very timely.

Dan Gorlin, *Choplifter*'s sole creator and programmer, had nothing to do for six months. Sitting in the Los Angeles house he was trying to sell, he eventually began to tinker with an Apple II computer loaned to him by his grandfather. Combining a fascination for helicopters with seasoned programming skills, Gorlin hacked the game out over that half-year period. Play-testing the game was a duty he reserved for a local kid he'd hired to repair his car, a duty that turned out to aid the evolution of *Choplifter*. "He was a big *Defender* freak," says Gorlin. "One day he said: 'You should have some men to pick up.'"

Similarities between the two games have been remarked upon ever since. Both were side-scrolling, both featured aerial manoeuvring against ground-based enemies and both centred on saving human beings. But *Defender* was science fiction through and through: your loyalties and objectives were distanced by a scenario set hundreds of years in the future. *Choplifter* on the other hand was of the here and now, rooted in the war-torn images of evening news broadcasts and echoing the global political events of the Iran hostage crisis 12 months before. Many of those playing the game for the first time in 1982 immediately assumed a connection between the situation in Iran and *Choplifter*, but it's a link Gorlin denies was direct. According to him it was a "combination of pure luck and subliminal influences on thoughts at the time. I do remember deliberately going for a high-concept story because I wanted to make some money, but I'm not even sure that I was the first one to call those little men 'hostages'. Honestly the benefits of that tie-in were something that none of us could have predicted, especially since nobody was sure who was going to buy these games one or two years down the road." Was there any compulsion not to make a game that so closely resembled a near national disaster? "If someone had tried to talk me out of it I wouldn't have fought very hard at the time."

But making an emotional impact (or at least building a gameplay dynamic that wasn't tied solely to competitiveness) was very important to Gorlin. *Choplifter*'s hostages may only be white pixellated silhouettes, but the game forced you to feel for any of the unlucky ones you either killed or weren't able to save. To that end, there was no scoring system in the original version of *Choplifter*, the only reward lay in rescuing as many hostages as possible. "Shooter games where you blow things up and rack up points always bored me personally and I think they provide a very shallow entertainment experience," he explains. "If you can't give people a sense of community in their fantasy life, what are you giving them?"

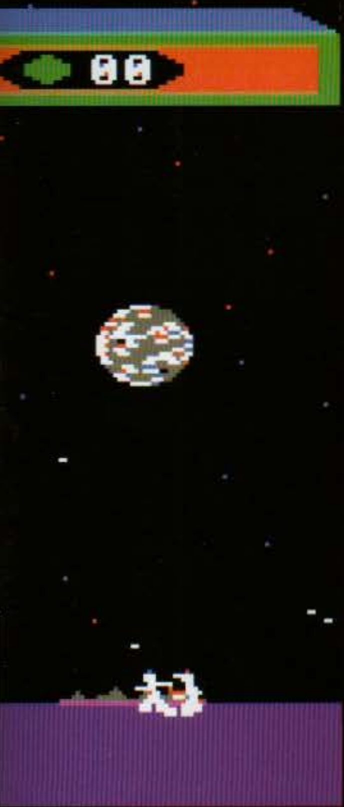
"Shooter games where you blow things up and rack up points always bored me, and I think they provide a very shallow experience"

Before embarking on *Choplifter*, Gorlin worked at Rand Corporation, programming AI languages for "a million-dollar



Although Gorlin claims that the game wasn't at all directly influenced by the situation in Iran, it's not hard to see why the rescue of 64 people (just two less than the 66 hostages initially taken) prompted assumptions of a connection







computer – I think it had 256k of memory!" Did this high-level computing knowledge automatically set him up for creating and programming games? "I'd have to say no, the kind of work we were doing really wasn't applicable to games on a one megahertz 48k machine," he says. "But I think something of the AI mindset caused me to change the behaviour of all the players in *Choplifter*. They were driven by a kind of directed random chance. There was a feel of things never happening the same way twice to the game, which was quite deliberate."

A feeling of completeness is what defined *Choplifter* – all the elements working so closely together, each consequential action a punishment or reward for your behaviour throughout the game. The physics were especially strong, with the chopper tilting to the angle at which you needed to steer and shoot. Was making the vehicle move in a realistic way important? "Very, although I don't think 'realistic' is the right term," Gorlin counters. "It doesn't really fly like a helicopter, but it does very much feel like a physical object that you're in control of. I loved that feeling and worked very hard to get it just right."

Choplifter was also the first contact many gamers had with the evil Bungeling Empire, a common military enemy throughout Broderbund's software that incidentally formed the basis for Will Wright's debut *Raid On Bungeling Bay*. Were the Bungelings Gorlin's idea or did they form part of a bigger strategy at Broderbund to unify all their titles? "Actually I think that started well before my time," Gorlin explains. "[Broderbund co-founder] Doug Carlston's earlier text and graphics games featured the Bungelings and it became a kind of running gag – all the bad guys were called Bungeling from then on. It was kind of like Kaos in ['60s US TV cop show] Get Smart, if anyone remembers that."

The company was

instrumental in Gorlin's life as a game designer and developer. Listening to him talk about how he came to find a publisher makes you nostalgic for those simpler times. "I went looking around in local computer stores, trying to get a feel for which companies I'd enjoy working with by their packaging. In those days games were shipped in baggies with cardboard inserts, so the feel of the product line actually did give you a feel for the people behind it." Having been spurned by Atari, Gorlin called Broderbund to ask it to look at his game. "I was talking to intelligent and fun people right from the start. They flew me out after they had seen a sample of my work. I think I stayed at Doug's house for a few days, you get the idea. They were good at welcoming people into the family and I got a great feeling about everyone I met. And it wasn't fluff either; they were all genuinely nice people."



The base from which you took off remained a fixture of the game's many ports, evolving as graphics improved. Aside from cosmetic updates, gameplay stayed very true to the original version throughout



Most gamers today play *Choplifter* through an emulator. Does it bother Gorlin that people are playing his game without having paid a penny for it? "Most products that go on the market today are in the trash bin of history within a few months," he says matter-of-factly. "You gotta love the fact that people are still playing a game I wrote in 1982, 24 years later."

These days, Gorlin spends a great deal of time teaching West African music, dance and culture with his dance troupe, Alokli. We asked him whether he feels lucky to have been able to spend his life doing the things he loves: "From my experience, I would say that anyone doing something they hate should stop doing it immediately, regardless of the consequences. Things have a way of working themselves out when you're doing something that motivates you."

Falling into things, either by design or chance, seems to be an overarching theme for Gorlin. But those for whom *Choplifter* was formative will be forever grateful that he fell into writing it – that fate and boredom conspired to make a classic out of an unsold house and the advice of an adolescent car mechanic.





The colour-coded counters at the top of the screen (left) represented how many hostages you killed (red), saved (green) or carried (blue)

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: EA Digital Illusions Creative Entertainment AB

DATE FOUNDED: 1992

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 220

HEAD OF STUDIO: Vice president Patrick Söderlund



URL: www.dice.se

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Battlefield 1942, Battlefield 2, Battlefield 2: Modern Combat, Battlefield 2142, Midtown Madness 3, RalliSport Challenge 1, RalliSport Challenge 2









DICE's next release will be *Battlefield: Bad Company* (above). It's not all about shooters, however, as the *Rallisport Challenge* games show

DICE
DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CREATIVE ENTERTAINMENT
AN EA COMPANY



LOCATION:
Stockholm, Sweden

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Battlefield: Bad Company
360, PS3
Unannounced FPS on 360, PC and PS3; unannounced FPS on PC; unannounced FPS/action game on 360, PC and PS3

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"DICE develops top-selling and top-quality video and PC games and has ambitions to create several unique IPs. Since October, we've been fully owned by EA, allowing further development of what we hope will be the best video and PC games ever.

"Since DICE was founded in 1992, we've delivered high-quality games with innovative gameplay experiences. With the new *Battlefield: Bad Company*, we're adding a singleplayer experience to a long line of multiplayer games with addictive and open-ended gameplay.

"The new DICE studio is located in the heart of Stockholm with a wonderful view over the inner archipelago. The internal design was chosen with a single goal in mind: to inspire our employees to be creative, innovative and to have a blast at work. Our mantra is: 'The best location in Stockholm, the best office in the industry, the best view in the world'.

"The future for us is both challenging and promising as the work of developing both AAA games and our employees' skills continues. Our employees not only have competitive salaries but also bonuses, stocks and perks, and they're actively encouraged to grow both as individuals and as game developers."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

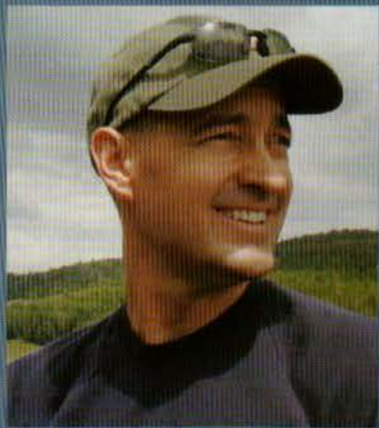
INSTITUTION NAME: University of Advancing Technology

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 1,100

URL: www.uat.edu

CONTACT: admissions@uat.edu – (800) 658-5744







UAT is a private university that claims to have been 'founded by a techno-geek for techno-geeks'. It began in 1983 as a small institution training engineers and architects in computer technology

KEY STAFF

Dave Bolman, provost and dean (above right)
Rebecca Whitehead, dean of academic affairs (right)



LOCATION:
Tempe, Arizona, USA

COURSES OFFERED

Game design, software engineering, network security, artificial life programming

INSIDE VIEW – DAVID CROSS

David, from Connecticut, is in his third year of studying games design at UAT.

"I enjoy the freedom at the University of Advancing Technology, and the access to industry-standard software and other tools. And instructors here are much more approachable than my teachers in high school. A real bonus of attending UAT is that I get to go to a lot of industry conferences and events like GDC, Siggraph, E3 and others."



COUNTER ORGANIC REVOLUTION



COR is UAT students' total conversion project based on *Unreal Tournament 2004* – a multiplayer-only shooter based on shape-changing machines rising up against their human rulers from a life of slavery

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Facing the future

When Digimask founder Gary Bracey had the idea for players to put their heads in games, he didn't expect to endure a seven-year rollercoaster ride



Gary Bracey, CEO and founder, Digimask

When covering games technology, it's easy to be lulled into a deterministic view of success and failure. Look closely at any company history, though, and it quickly becomes apparent there's a lot more required than the quality of technology, staff or the available finance. Wide ranging market conditions, and even the vagaries of luck, also play their part.

One of the most interesting such examples in recent years has been the convoluted path taken by UK company Digimask. Founded in 2000, in the white heat of the internet boom, its unique selling point was to provide people with the ability to put their faces into games.

"A year or so before PS2 was released, I saw a demo which showed a head pulling all sorts of expressions," explains **Gary Bracey**, Digimask's founder and CEO. "That gave me the idea."

The basis of the technology was relatively simple: to use a front and profile photograph of a human face to extract a 3D mesh and a texture. The first prototype took six months to code, although it was cumbersome. "You had to manually tag up about 180 points on each photo and it took 45 minutes to create the head," Bracey recalls.

But buoyed by this effort, Bracey started showing off the technology to friends in the industry, including Sony's Chris Deering and Psygnosis' Ian Hetherington, who became Digimask's chairman. "Ian believed in the technology and helped facilitate meetings with venture capitalists," Bracey says. Eventually, Digimask was funded to the tune of £5 million by a company called TecCapital.

"We had to dramatically reduce the number of points that needed to be marked up and dramatically reduce the time it took," Bracey points out. Other required features included adding a bone system for animation. Around 20 developers plus a couple of sales and marketing staff were hired. More difficult, however, was the challenge of how to get the system out into the hands of consumers.

The solution the company used was to set up a centralised database, which would be populated with heads as people emailed their photos direct to Digimask. Once created, the heads would be available online, available from the server to any application that supported the technology.

"Although Digimask was created with games in mind, we realised other applications could take advantage of it," says Bracey. Obvious examples included e-commerce opportunities such as trying on spectacles or make-up."

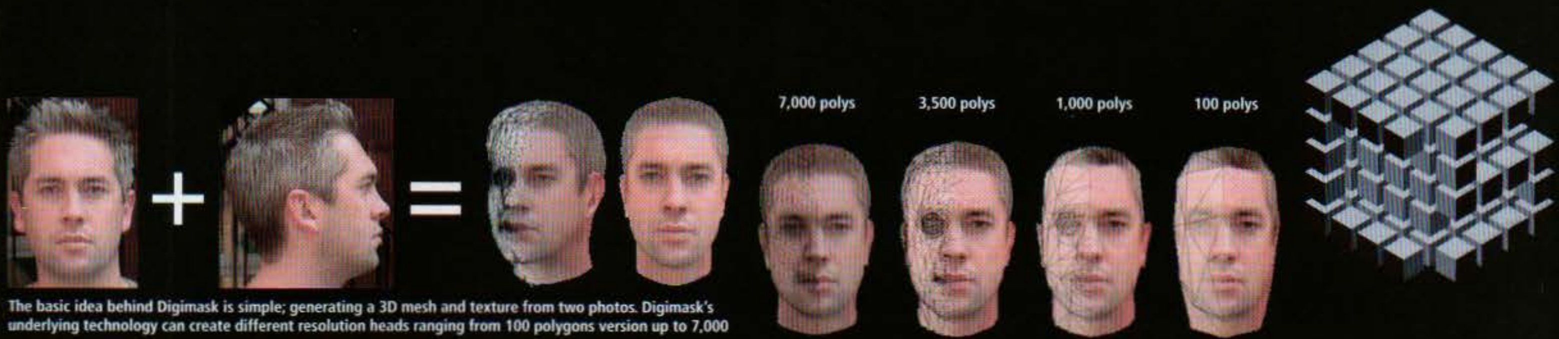
In theory, it was a great system, and certainly one that pleased the investors. If successful, Digimask could have been the de facto standard for online personalisation services. The flip-side was the cost of setting up the infrastructure.

"Because it was free for consumers, the idea was we'd be able to build up a database of millions of heads," Bracey said. "We'd give away some software so people could use them for email signatures and other fun stuff, and that would allow us to go to games and e-commerce companies and say: 'Look there's a userbase of X million. You should license this technology'."

In order to kick-start the process, around £300,000 was spent on marketing, including posters on the London

Another recent game using Digimask was *World Series Poker*, where it was used to bring more immersion to online games





The basic idea behind Digimask is simple; generating a 3D mesh and texture from two photos. Digimask's underlying technology can create different resolution heads ranging from 100 polygons version up to 7,000

Underground. "It built up our database, but not to a massive extent," Bracey says. "The main marketing campaign was directed into London and what we hoped for was a viral campaign spreading out as friends started to send each other these funny e-cards."

Another worrying factor was the resistance Digimask was experiencing when talking to developers. "A number of companies said: 'We'd love to have it in the game' – but as games start to slip, as they tend to do, Digimask was cut because it wasn't proven."

Eventually it was used in some relatively high profile games such as one of EA's *Formula 1* series and Evolution Studio's *World Rally Championship*, but was only used for in-game characters rather than being made available for players to input their own heads.

The vision started to unravel. "Initially we didn't want the users to have direct access to their Digimask heads, but that became impractical because most people were still using dial-up connections," Bracey says. "So we had to completely scrap the centralised server model and give the software away." By this time, the company was also running into financial problems. Most of its initial investment had been spent but the expected revenues weren't materialising. And the internet bubble had burst.

"In hindsight, there were lots of things you'd do differently," Bracey muses, when recalling the bad times of 2003 and 2004, after which Digimask downsized to a handful of staff. "The biggest challenge wasn't just the marketing and getting the consumer buy-in, it was a unique product with a unique business model. We were just too early for the market."

Yet with the basic technology finished and robust, Digimask continued to operate. The technology was licensed by the BBC, British Telecom and Universal Studios, and thanks to Sony's EyeToy camera, gained a simple route into PlayStation 2 games.

Finally, in the summer of 2004, Bracey thought the breakthrough moment was close: "The first game Sony committed to was *This Is Football 2005*," he says. "It was implemented really well, and there was a whole magazine campaign about putting yourself in the game."

One advert featured a headless footballer who, instead of kicking a ball, was kicking his head. At the last minute, however, the campaign had to be pulled because of the murder of Liverpool engineer Ken Bigley, who was beheaded in Iraq. "I can't say we were devastated compared to what happened but obviously it affected us," Bracey says.

"The first game Sony committed to was This Is Football 2005. It was implemented really well"

By Christmas 2004, it was all over. "We'd run out of money so I said to the guys: 'We tried our best. Time to look for other jobs.' Making that decision felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders," he says. As fate would have it, though, this was not the end. A funder with a potential application for the technology turned up. "I said: 'Forget it. We're going out of business. I can't do this any more'," Bracey states.

But as he explains, psychologically having made the decision to quit proved to be the turning point. The new lifeline was accepted and with funding onboard, the now three-person company ventured into 2005 with fresh hope. "I don't want to say too much about what happened. There was a lot of hot air and, in hindsight, it wasn't the best strategic move for Digimask, but it did keep us going," Bracey says, as if almost surprised at his commitment to his idea.





After seven years, Digimask has finally been fully implemented in a game; the avatar customisation system in Ubisoft's *Rainbow Six Vegas*. Using the Xbox 360's camera to capture the photos needed to create the Digimask, the game enables you to add camouflage and other personalisation items to your face

And so to the end of 2006. Under new ownership, market conditions seem to have caught up with the vision. Personalisation is the big buzzword, while everyone has digital cameras and games consoles are all online. There finally seems to be light at the end of the Digimask tunnel.

It's a component of the Unreal Engine 3 Integrated Partners Program, has been used in games such as *World Series Poker* and Konami's *Karaoke Revolution* series. It's also got into its first shooter as part of player character customisation suite in *Rainbow Six Vegas*. And Microsoft backing the technology too as it looks to break its Xbox Live Vision Camera into the market.

"Microsoft identified Digimask as being an incentive for people to buy the camera," Bracey says. "In fact it was Microsoft who got it into *Rainbow Six*, and it's going down really well with the players. It's exactly what we envisaged seven years ago."



One early plan for Digimask that never really took off was using it for mobile phone applications

www.digimask.com

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

HAPPY ZUNE DAY!



BY JEFF MINTER

Never even seen a Zune, don't know if it'll be any better than an iPod, and it may not be available in the UK for another year, but hey, there are three Llamasoft-created visualisations in the client so at least I know that part must be good.

I've not seen the client yet, since the integration of our effects was done at Microsoft, but I hope they kept our names for them – they're all named after My Little Ponies.

It's that time of year again – early darkness, rain and cold, every single bloody advert on telly having bastard sleigh bells jingling; time for warm nights in front of a roaring plasma, controller in hand. And for hardware launches – Zune today (not that anyone in Europe not having written some visualisers for the PC-side client really gives a smeg about that), PS3 and Wii in both Japan and the US... in all, I must say I'm rather looking forward to this round of the console wars, which should prove to be interesting.

Last night, Dave down the pub came over and asked me: "So what's this Nintendo Wii thing then?" – it seems he'd seen one of the ads on telly. This is in itself unusual, since neither Dave nor Elaine have ever shown any interest in a console launch before (they took a passing interest in the 360 adverts around the time that came out, but only because they knew we'd worked on the 360, they had no actual interest in acquiring one). But during the course of the last year they've both acquired DSes and now seem quite intrigued by the idea of Wii. They aren't people you'd typically consider to be gamers; Elaine is in her 50s and Dave in his 60s, but they both enjoy puzzle games of the likes of *Zoo Keeper* and *Bejewelled*, and so have gravitated towards the DS. I guess they are representative of the 'casual gamers' that Nintendo seems to be aiming to woo; although in truth Elaine probably manages more hours of gaming per day than any so-called hardcore gamer I know. It's all card and puzzle games on the PC or time spent with DS in hand, but she sure puts in the time.

They're interested enough to have requested that I bring my Wii over when I get it in December, and I shall be intrigued to see what they make of it. Dave has expressed an interest in that golf game for PS2 that you use a little club to play, but never sufficiently interested to actually pick up a PS2 to play it on. Maybe *Wii Sports* will be enough to give him the push.

It's interesting to hear people like Dave and Elaine talk about the Wii. Graphics aren't even mentioned; their interest was in the controller and how it works, and the physical size of the Wii ('pick up three of those DVD boxes... that's how big it is'). Maybe Nintendo really have got it right this time with respect to picking up the casual gamers, and to interest people who wouldn't normally be seen dead sitting in front of a console. Such people couldn't really give a toss about how many polygons a piece of hardware can push, but knowing that it's fun to use and isn't huge and ugly could be very significant to them. I can also see the Wii appealing to those types for whom only physical, social games will do; people who'd rather be playing Trivial Pursuit while getting mildly pissed on red wine than running through corridors pushing crates and shooting people.

> "Maybe Nintendo really have got it right this time with respect to picking up the casual gamers"

The really interesting thing to see will be if the Wii ends up delivering more than just a passing appeal to the 'slightly drunken auntie at Christmas' brigade, and ends up enriching gaming for everyone, conventional gamers and inebriated rellies alike. There's been quite a lot of vigorous debate about this on our forum, with opinions divided between 'yes, it's a revolution' and 'no, it's just a gimmick'. I haven't so much as touched a Wii yet, so I'm undecided; I'll be better informed to offer an opinion after December 8. I'm cautiously optimistic, though; we've all been using basically the same kind of controller for over a decade now, and it would seem to make sense to me that shooting things by aiming a pointy thing and pulling a trigger, or swordfighting by making swordy gestures, or being able to push and pull things by actually making pushing and pulling motions would in the end be less haptically dissonant than having to filter everything through a translation layer that maps actions onto sticks and buttons.

Time and *Zelda* will tell, I suppose. The Wii controller also introduces many possibilities for the creation of gimmicky rubbish – you just have to look at the best and worst of what's available on the DS to see that it can go either way. But at least it's interesting, which is more than can be said for what I've heard of the PS3 launch so far, which could be summed up as 'oh, games look a lot like 360 games, then' and '*Gears Of War* is looking nicer than the launch titles'.

To be fair, we really shouldn't be drawing any conclusions for at least a year – by then I'm sure all three will be under my telly and we'll know if the Wii has enough depth to be more than a gimmick and if the PS3 really does have what it takes to distinguish itself from the 360.

And maybe by then I'll have my PS3 *Wipeout*. Come on Sony, do the right thing...

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

WRITE TO THE POINT

Not long ago, I asked the New Yorker's senior theatre critic, **John Lahr**, what he thought of videogames. They were, he said, "a sign of the nihilistic times". **Julie Burchill** disagreed. "They are too much fun to be art," she told me. Of course, as we know, videogames are a nihilistic waste of time, and they're fun, and they're art, too.

Last month, I wondered why games struggle to delve into the underworld of human feeling. There's a long, unacknowledged tradition of writers and artists trying to work with videogames. Back in 1981, Robert Pinsky, one-time US poet laureate, wrote about the close parallels – rhythm, metre, intensity of meaning – between poetry and computer code. The late Douglas Adams wrote some work exclusively as interactive fiction. **Adam Cadre**, a young novelist who also writes interactive fiction told me he coded mainly because, instead of flowing like a novel, "it accretes". To write prose, Cadre needed to dive into the flow of a story. "I need to settle in around midnight, and type without interruptions until six or seven in the morning," he told me. "That is, by far, when I'm the most productive". In fact, Cadre's routine suited interactive fiction writing so well, it caused him to doubt his novel writing career. "That's one of the qualities that makes me wonder whether I didn't give up the wrong medium when I decided to take a hiatus from interactive fiction".

Not every kind of medium translates well into videogames. The open-ended journey that characterises good game narrative would make for terrible theatre, say (as games theorist Espen Aarseth has pointed out, no one wants to play *Hamlet: The Game*: "Fail – time and time again – to avenge your father's death!"). Games aren't just interactive cinema, they're new, and the best games acknowledge this. The problem with most attempts to bring an artistic perspective to videogames is that they tend to try to drag traditional, dying arts across our new digital frontier. But not always.

Recently, I spoke with **Marc Laidlaw**, the science fiction novelist who joined Valve to design levels, and ended up 'writing' both *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2*. He outlined the difference between his work on novels and on games. He told me his work on the *Half-Life* series was still, he thought, 'writing' – in fact, "much more *actual* writing as time goes by. For *Half-Life 1*, it was less about writing and more about giving a narrative-like structure to the game experience. For *Half-Life 2*, we were beginning to develop characters and test out how much weight they could carry in our peculiar medium."

> After the Lumière brothers' first films, cinema made us wonder what could be seen; now videogames make us wonder what can be done

Laidlaw has been writing games for ten years; enough to shift his self-perception. "I no longer think about how my prose writing has informed my game writing," he said. "I'm really wondering how everything I've learned from writing games might be instructive in whatever prose I write next."

In the rush of excitement after the Lumière brothers' first films, cinema made us wonder what could be seen; now videogames, with their capacity to let us feel what it's like to do impossible things, make us wonder what can be done. The job of games-makers, and the jobs of people who write about them, is to dig for fresh insight into our virtual worlds, where those possibilities both enlighten and confound us.

As readers of this column may well have noticed, I'm fascinated by *Second Life*. Across the real world, some – including musician Suzanne Vega, Duran Duran, the author of the bestselling book The Long Tail, Chris Anderson, corporations such as Warner Brothers, Reebok and IBM – share my interest. The VP of technology at IBM, Irving Wladawsky-Berger, told me he saw virtual worlds like *Second Life* as 'the next generation of the internet'. Others, including a couple of gin-soaked hacks at my favourite website The Register – where they call *Second Life* 'SadVille' – and regular forum posters on the **Edge** website, vehemently disagree. I spoke with **Philip Rosedale**, CEO of Linden Lab and the dreamer of the *Second Life* dream. I asked if he felt vindicated by the recent growth of his virtual world. "Yes!" he said. "I have to resist the urge to say 'I told you so'." Rosedale invested his own money, when many believed his world wouldn't amount to much. "Nobody believed," he said.

In games you can do anything; nothing puts up too much of a fight. As with forum bitching, we feel like we're putting ourselves at risk, without really changing ourselves. In the same way, videogames expand our sense of what's possible – but the ease with which they give up their secrets doesn't build the strength we need to put those possibilities into motion. The people who make the games are the ones who sweat so we can play. A while ago, I spoke with **Steve Russell**, creator of *Spacewar*. Steve told me he didn't play games, and that he enjoyed making them more. For him, the struggle of giving birth to something new was a reward in itself. "It's the people who make the games," Russell told me, "who have the most fun of all."

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net




BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

I'M BACKING NINTENDO!

Dear Optimistic Idiot.
Due to a European shortage of the Nintendo Wii console, we regret to inform you that we will be unable to supply your pre-ordered Nintendo Wii at launch. As an official distributor of Nintendo products we are guaranteed more stock before Christmas, but Nintendo have informed us, along with all other official Nintendo retailers, that the console will not be freely available until next year."

Whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. It's a bit like calling your dog in for its dinner, when you haven't even opened the tin yet. Actually, it's like calling your dog in for its dinner, and then showing the dog photographs of other dogs eating their dinners, and then sewing the dog's lips together. And then shoving the tin – and the photographs, and sewing kit – up the dog's arse.

"All pre-orders will be fulfilled on a first come, first served basis, and we will fulfil your order as soon as we can." But when that will be is, frankly, anyone's guess. We certainly don't have a clue, so please don't phone, or email, asking.

"If you no longer wish to keep your pre-order with us please login to your account and remove the item from your outstanding orders. Have a wonderful Christmas, and do try and enjoy the Xbox 360 you'll probably buy instead."

Well. Here we go again, then. Another year, another console launch blighted by shortages. It's not the retailers' fault, of course. I'm sure that when they heard the news from Nintendo, they literally ripped their trousers in frustration, much as I did when I received that email. Heck, I didn't stop at my trousers; by the time I'd finished reading that message, my underpants and testicles were also in shreds.

Even though I'd kind of expected it, I naïvely hoped that perhaps – this time – they'd get their parp-holes in gear, and actually manufacture enough hardware to meet demand. History was, of course, screaming otherwise.

Prior to last year's Xbox 360 launch I was let down by another online retailer (who were, of course, let down by Microsoft – no sense in shooting the messenger). I ended up swallowing both my pride, and my sense of fiscal responsibility (and later, when I got my bank statement, several large bottles of sedatives), and went the eBay route.

Of course, by the time you read this the Wii will have been released, and you'll all know how chronic the shortages were, and whether society imploded in a big, fiery heap, with incensed consumers lobbing flaming effigies of Miyamoto-san through the doors of Nintendo Europe's HQ. Maybe they'll actually have pulled it out of the bag – a world first – a console launch where everybody gets what they wanted.

> "There's absolutely no excuse for launching a console at that price. It's stupid – it's 3DO stupid"

Call me Hector Stupid, but I simply don't get it. Why does this always happen? They have so long to prepare for these launches, and yet there are always, always shortages. I'm genuinely starting to believe that it's intentional. Maybe it's all about perception; better to have the media report on a sell-out, must-have item than an overstocked flop.

It never used to bother me when I could blag consoles for free (I dare say I could now, if I wasn't so cripplingly awful at blagging – I know several 'retired' games journalists, who didn't even have a monthly column or anything, who continued to receive freebies years after dropping out of the industry). But now, as a consumer, it really does piss on my goat that I can't get to play consoles at launch. Not without paying absurd sums of money.

Of course, once I get my hands on a Wii I dare say I'll forget all about the delays. Memories of my hunt for a 360 were banished moments after I fired up *Call Of Duty 2*.

Even so, things are a bit different this Christmas. Xbox 360 shortages were still going on until the spring, but Microsoft more or less had the next gen market to itself. Nintendo may think it's aiming at a different market to Sony and Microsoft, but the gadget-obsessed media doesn't see it like that. The PlayStation 3 is – probably – going to hit in March, or thereabouts, and Nintendo needs to have established a significant lead by then.

I say all this out of love, of course. I'm biased, and I don't care who knows it. I want Nintendo to wipe the floor with the PS3. Sony's arrogant, ill-conceived next-gen blueprint – coupled to that truly imperious price point – has genuinely angered me. It has angered me because I know that Sony knows that people are going to pay for the PS3 however inconsiderately it's priced. It's exploitation, pure and simple. There's absolutely no excuse for launching a console at that price. It's stupid – it's 3DO stupid – and I want Nintendo to punt the cocky smirk right off Sony's smug, self-satisfied gob.

Anything that could jeopardise Nintendo's chances of doing that makes me jittery. With only three or so months between the launches, there's a very real risk of people getting emails like the one above, and saying: "Sod it – I'll cancel the Wii pre-order, and save up for a PS3. That's got a tilt-sensitive thingy too, right?"

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 170

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: A Letter To Edge

Has anyone here wrote into the Edge 'Inbox' lately? It struck me today, while browsing said pages, how outdated, (physically) writing a letter into a magazine actually seems these days. I mean, back when I was a nipper, when the pen was king, a quick one off the wrist for Jimmy Saville, or a long winded complaint (complete with inky fingerprints) was all the rage. But now, if you want to get your point across, you just head for a related message board. Or rattle off an email.
Zoom!

I'd only write a handwritten letter if I'd get one in return. I guarantee Edge don't stoop to my level.
regmcfly

I hardly ever wrote letters before email came along and write less since it did. Then I hardly send telegrams any more either. I've been in the Inbox before now but the quality has done right up recently because of all those English graduates that haven't got a DS.
freethinker

I have a problem, and wondered if any developers out there would like to respond. I have just bought *Buzz! Junior: Jungle Party* with the hope of playing a few games with my young son. However, we can't. The reason? Both of us are colourblind, only slightly, but colourblind all the same.

Supposedly around one in eight of the male population are colourblind, yet developers can't seem to cater for us. Neither my son nor I can tell the difference between the light yellow and lime green items on screen – we can just about tell the orange apart from the others but it takes concentration.

This is not a new problem for me. The first time was with one of the protection look-up charts you used to get with ZX Spectrum games back in the dark ages, and although I like *Tetris*-style games, the *Puyo Puyo* series is almost impossible for me.

How difficult would it have been to put a square, circle, triangle and cross on the *Buzz* controllers and icons on screen? Maybe the next version can have stickers I can retrofit to my buzzers. Even using contrasting colours such as pale yellow and dark green with a bright red would be an improvement.

So if any developers are working on titles with colour-based gameplay and would like the opinion of a colour-deficient individual, I'm quite willing to help out – in confidence obviously.
Neil McCoy

Not only do games blatantly target males, but it's clearly just the heterosexual ones. In any games involving romance, optional or otherwise, it assumes you are romantically and sexually interested in the opposite sex. Of course, you can sometimes simply opt out of romance and therefore keep the feeling of projecting your persona on to the game character, but when will games be brave enough to let us choose to shrug off the romantic interest of both male and female NPCs, regardless of the sex of our player model?

A recent example of a game offering the option of homosexual interaction is *Canis Canem Edit*, where you can have Jimmy Hopkins kiss a certain boy instead of the various girls. You still need to offer up a gift to your intended, you are rewarded with the same health boost, and the kiss is handled no differently to the boy-girl kiss, not used as a childish punchline. Ultimately, you still 'get the girl' (several times) if you stick to the main story, but at least Rockstar aren't two-dimensional about sexuality in their rich mix of personalities and possibilities.

"A recent example of a game offering the option of homosexual interaction is Canis Canem Edit, where you can have Jimmy Hopkins kiss a certain boy"

I always felt tempted to play *Harvest Moon*, but I was put off by the fact that a big part of the game seemed to be about nurturing a heterosexual relationship, culminating in marriage and children. Roleplay frequently asks us to step into the shoes of someone very different from ourselves, but it's a shame that to feel more of a connection with the lead character, gay male players need to import the 'girl version' to get anywhere near to their own personal experiences of partnering up and settling down.



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

Half-Life 2 is a wonderful middle ground because Gordon Freeman is a completely blank canvas for players to project their own persona on to. It's clear from the wonderful animation and voice work that Alyx is incredibly fond of Gordon, and her father hints at her feelings being more, but she never drapes all over you or whispers sweet nothings over the Nova Prospekt radio system. Gordon is given the space to be her best friend just as easily as her secret crush, and it's wonderfully inclusive as a result; the player isn't forced to be straight.

Dark Messiah is quite the opposite. I was completely put off by the innuendo-spouting, barely dressed succubus coming on to me for 15 hours. I was more than happy to banish her when I got the chance. Developers, don't let me look through the eyes of the hero, control everything he does, and then lumber me with this pest that is so convinced of my heterosexuality that she's practically horizontal from start to finish. "Sorry love, no luck here."

I love games and I'd much rather queue up for *Zelda* on December 8 than go on an equal rights march, but I do think that perhaps the time has come for games not only to offer us the choice of male and female player models, but also straight or gay

orientation, so that stories and NPC interactions can be more inclusive and dynamic. As it stands, gay people largely don't exist in the polygonal world, and while I'm not saying that every new *Need For Speed* should have a Brokeback Mountain side quest, surely the heterosexual male/female choice of lead isn't enough and ignores a demographic that book, TV and film acknowledge and value.
Jason Mitchell

Games still woefully underestimate the diversity of their audience, and – as these letters' suggestions show – can also overestimate the difficulty of being more welcoming to more players. Hopefully, Jason Mitchell will find winning this month's DS Lite a less frustrating gaming experience.

Jonathan F Condliffe's letter in **E169** set off a lightbulb. It's not that I particularly agree with

"Oh yes, I said it: videogames are nothing more than electronic (and progressively expensive) toys. We are men and women playing with virtual dolls"

his 'old-timer' laments about games, but there were some points to consider about games being "ephemeral, transient and leaving no trace".

Mr Condliffe argues videogames are not even on the emotional level of the early 1900s' flickering, silent moving pictures, while in the same issue Misfire Dodds argues games are more like television in their serial delivery and reality-based projections.

But can we take a long hard look at what videogames truly are? Toys. Oh yes, I said it: videogames are nothing more than electronic (and progressively



Neil McCoy's colourblindness stops him enjoying *Buzz! Junior*, and he asks why simple steps aren't taken to solve this problem



Jason Mitchell finds enough space in the chemistry between *Half-Life 2*'s Gordon and Alyx to acccomodate straight and gay players

expensive) toys. We are men and women playing with virtual dolls. For guys, you may have grown up super-imposing your psyche into your favourite Transformer or GI Joe toy as a youth, but now you do the same with Leon or Dante – sound effects and all!

Toys, in regards to Mr Condliffe's argument, are indeed ephemeral, transient and ultimately dissolve into bargain bins as the next, newer toy comes along. Who are we kidding? There will be those that argue: "Oh – videogames are more than toys, they are works of art." But so are toys, what with their 3D modelling, character design, voice and sound effects, technological/cost limitations...

The naysayers may counter: "Well, games such as *Second Life* provide new challenges and opportunities for communities of people. How is this anything like playing with Barbies?" To which I would say, *Second Life* is nothing more than a playground for your Barbie or Ken doll to play with other Barbie and Ken dolls: dress them up, have a tea party, pay money for more accessories – some earrings or a plastic house, perhaps? And this final point may be hitting a little below the belt, but have you noticed how most Xbox 360 'next-gen' characters look like plastic, shiny dolls? *Gears Of War*? *Dead Or Alive 4*, etc? It's a bit eerie.
Stinke

In **E169** Misfire Dodds stated in his letter that "perhaps videogames' closest relation may be television" and in the same issue Jonathan Condliffe complained that "[developers] try to produce a playable novel, comic or film".

So may I suggest a new influence? Theatre. I know, it's been suggested, but let me finish. In London, the theatre company Punchdrunk recently performed Faust in an abandoned industrial building block. It has scenes going on in empty rooms and floors filled with installations and endless rows of empty filing systems. The audience were given ghostly masks and left to find the story, actors and scenes for themselves. This form of organic promenade theatre gives an experience, not a presented narrative. I think games are talking in the wrong language, attempting to evoke emotion with cinematic shots or using narrative pace stolen from cheap novels.

Each audience member left with similar influences but different experiences. Imagine a silent MMORPG where everyone looks the same, and wanders their environment watching and engaging in AI-led action. Imagine manipulating a player to think he's controlling the game and then prove the game is controlling him. This is what games should be doing. The greatest tools games have are manipulation and interaction, and until the shift in thinking moves from the static, stolen language of film, television and novels we will never see them used effectively.
Gareth Martin

It's strange that the two media that also call their partipants 'players' (theatre and music) are so consistently ignored by game commentators. Perhaps theatre-literate game designers, such as *Assassin's Creed*'s Patrice Desilets, (see **E169**) will help.

Games are misunderstood – we all know this. We need only look at the story of Mr Biffo's attempt to insert a line of videogame-related dialogue into a TV script to see that. Or, more seriously, look at *Canis Canem Edit* being turned from a grown-up Dennis the Menace into a 'Columbine simulator' in order to see the ramifications of this misunderstanding.

There's not much that we can do about the way the media represents our

Continued

F

Topic: Atari Jaguar launch failure?

Cos, ya know, it's been out for a while now and yet sales seem a bit slow. Atari's failure to manufacture enough units to meet demand could possibly be a factor.
erekose200

I blame Trip Hawkins for releasing the stellar 3DO, it clearly had an impact on the success of the Jag.
Speedhaak

I don't see how any console can possibly fail when it has an exclusive distribution deal with, er, Rumblelows.
Hulka T

Does anyone think it's worth upgrading to a SDTV to play the Jag?
OTOKO

Absolutely, and no less than 14 inches. Make sure you invest in the best coaxial RF lead you can, you don't want to miss some of the stunning detail...
Ali

Whatever happened to 3DO? I still remember the print ad in Edge. I opened the magazine in the train and all these feathers fell out. It was as if a chicken had been caught up in the printing process. Bastards. Everyone pointed and laughed at me and I've been traumatised ever since. EA and Trip H ftl.
hunk

Why are you all talking about the Jag in the past tense?
Childintime

Because when time loops over itself, the Jaguar will be the future.
yxnomei

Damn right, space-time is curved, the Jaguar is more futuristic than our wildest dreams.
Lazy Gunn

Damn straight. Curved. Whatever. I have a lens set up in my bedroom akin to that in the Ben Affleck afflicted John Woo film 'Paycheck'. So vast is its aperture that it can see around the curve of the universe and back on itself. Trust me when I say that the CD-i is teh future.
darthjim

hobby. The onus is on the industry itself to make sure it is understood and portrayed accurately in print and onscreen. Hopefully, this process will be aided by journalists and other public figures who are gamers themselves.

We can at least correct the misunderstandings made by our friends and family. Picture this scene: you're talking excitedly about a new hardware or software release, only to hear: "Haven't you got enough videogames by now?" (usually accompanied by a sigh). As far as I can see, few other forms of entertainment are treated this way. It's perfectly acceptable to get excited about a film without being told that there's no point going to see Casino Royale because you've already watched both The Departed and Borat in the last month. Literature, too, seems to avoid this kind of dismissal (it would be a very unusual household where "Son, do you really have to read all of the Brontë sisters' work, isn't Wuthering Heights enough?" was heard). This attitude occurs because, ultimately, a huge amount of people still don't really know what games are.

Too many people think that games are mindless. They view them without context, seemingly believing that *GTA* is pure, endless violence and not the videogame version of the much more socially acceptable gangster or action film. They think videogames lack imagination, failing to note that in *The Legend Of Zelda* (alongside countless other titles) videogames have a fairytale universe as steeped in its own myth and lore as Tolkien's own. They think that all we want to do is blow up the man or shoot the zombie, not liberate City 17. It's not just a case of failing to grasp narratives. How can a non-gamer see the huge differences between *Halo*'s combat and *Gears Of War*'s own take on gunplay? Can they even understand the appeal of that gameplay in the first place? Do they know that games make you wonder? That games make you strategise? That games let you explore their world?

The next time I hear someone I'm close to dismiss my hobby outright, I plan to make them an offer. I'm going to give them the opportunity to learn what videogames are about. I'm going to get them to pick a game and let me teach them how to play. Then, in time, I'll show them something else. Perhaps they won't be convinced, perhaps they won't enjoy it as much as I do, but hopefully they'll understand why.
Craig Owens

An excellent plan. Best not to start with *Postal* or *Steel Batallion*, though, eh?

F

Topic: Wii should be very careful...

Check this out all you would be Wii owners and pay heed: www.wiihaveaproblem.com
superflyninja

Some dude killed his cat.
Spence

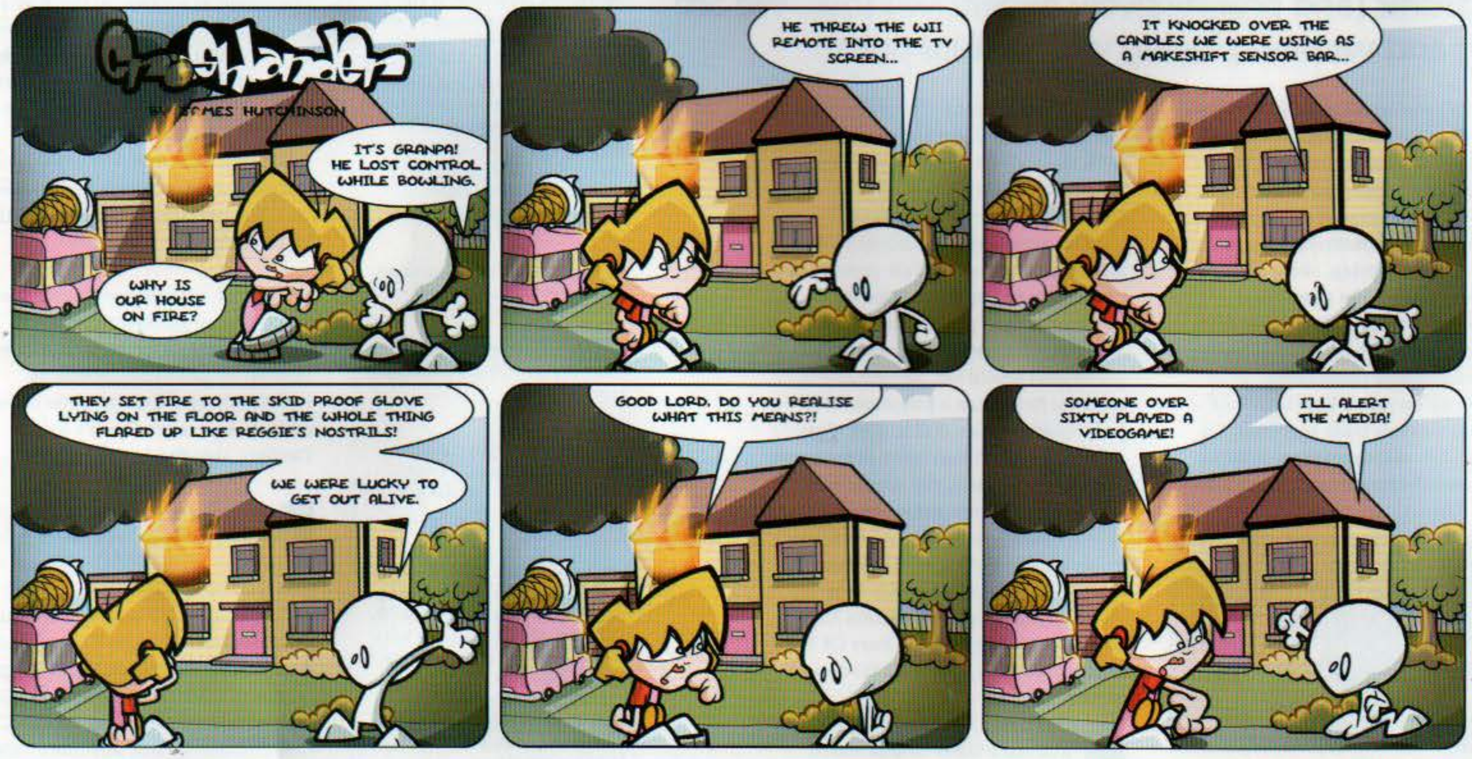
I'm now thinking that Sony manufactured the SIXAXIS to be as light as possible to prevent collateral damage from moving it around.
Joe

I think for £180 they could at least include a metal rivet strap that doesn't snap so easy. But saying that, if they did it would be Nintendo getting sued because my hand fell off.
Spence

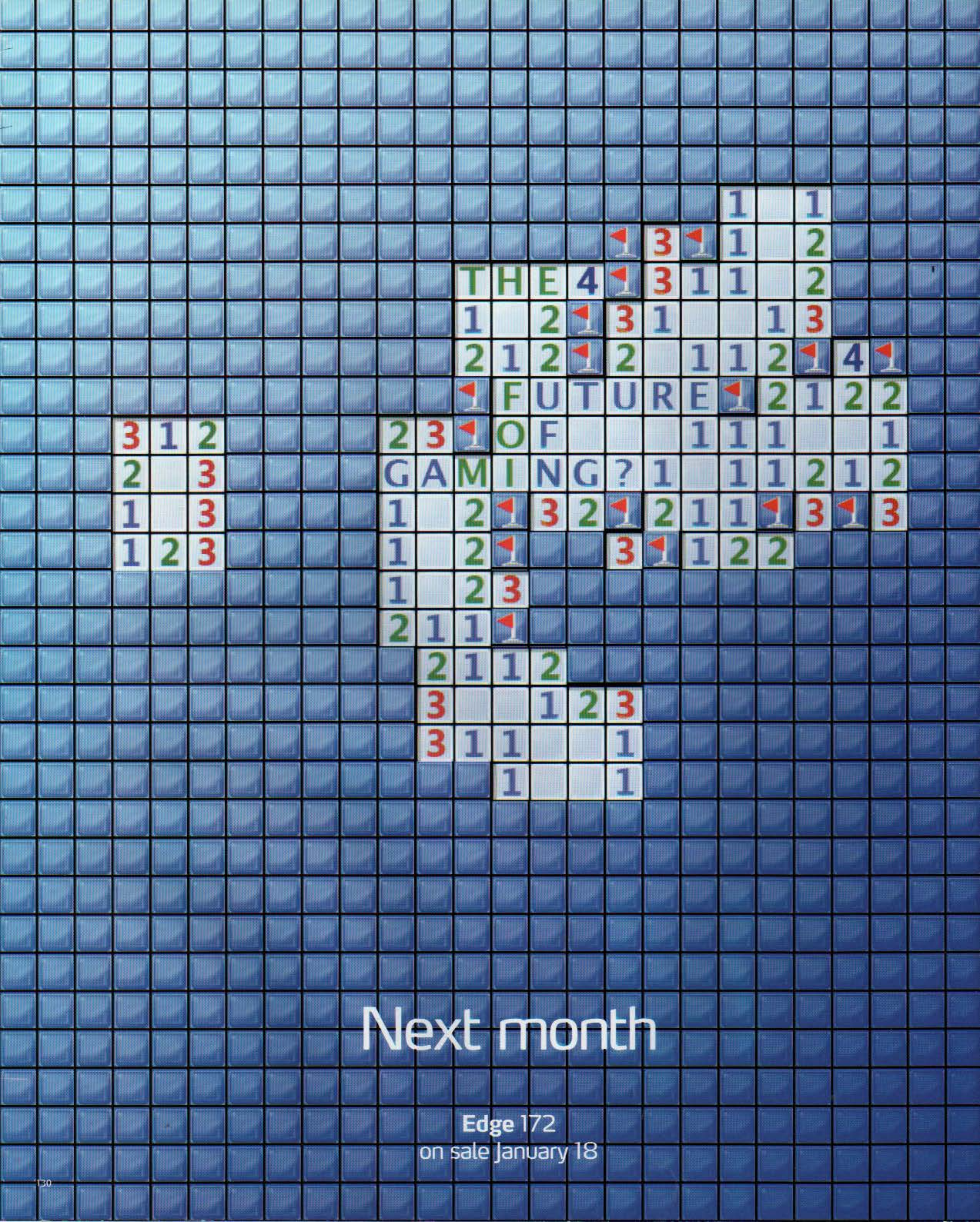
Here starts the argument to prove that people just want to, and should play games in the traditional way.
Windy

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address:
Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath BA1 2BW

Inbox

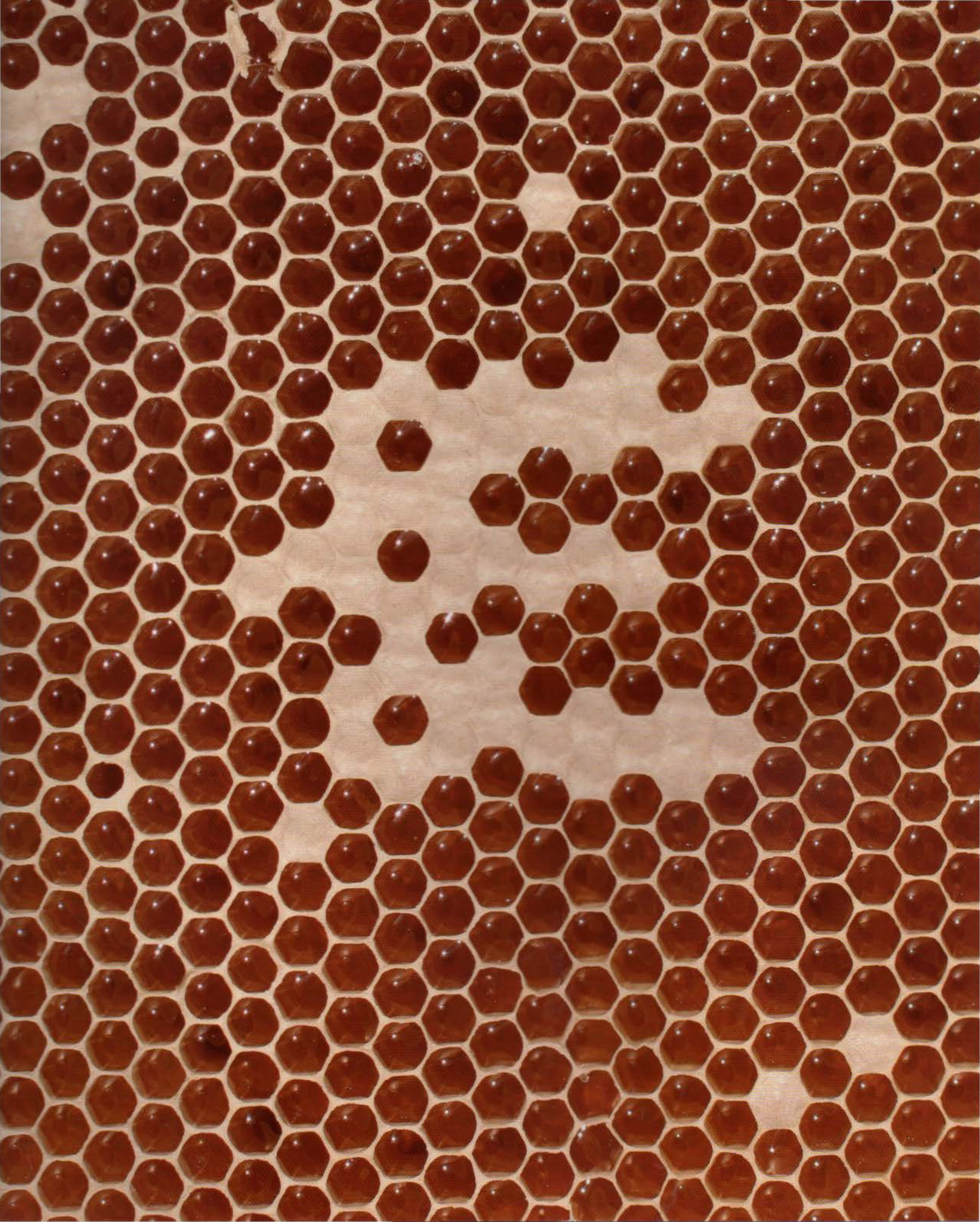


Visit the Crashlander archive at www.crashlander.com/edge



Next month

Edge 172
on sale January 18





Future
MEDIA WITH PASSION

JANUARY 2007 £4.50
01>
9 771350 159045